

M. Canadian 12-5-76

**Sheffield Crucible Studio**  
**JEFF NUTTALL**

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## Scum

TO USE the Paris commune as a vehicle for sentiments as simplistic and modish as those of the Women's Liberation Movement might seem to be politically irresponsible but proves in this production to be creatively perceptive and rich.

The Monstrous Regiment is a new permutation of that growing body of young performers making up four or five didactic theatre groups operating up and down the land. It is dedicated to a predominance of female performers and therefore has to interpret social situations so that their guiding spirit, the special poetry of female anger, is most graphically available.

Scum, a collective extension of a script by C. G. Bond, is about four laundresses led by a sadistic old virago called Madame Mole, who romp into the battle. The songs are what you'd expect whilst God and Dirty Linen sung by Madame Masson, who also makes a fine job of the closing speech, is a bit better than that. The action routines, dialogue, staging are sharp and forceful, even though the excursions into audience involvement were skimmed last night.

Just down the road from the Crucible there are women not too far removed from these four angels of the barricades. They would understand this play deeply were they ever to see it. Those who possess the kind of soaring womanhood sung out by Madame Mole, for whom this piece seems almost a monologue, are unlikely to be seen in the flesh in the Crucible for some long time. When they arrive the company will have achieved it's real aim and we should have theatre indeed.



*Washday at the Crucible . . . a scene from Scum: Death Destruction and Dirty Washing, presented by the Monstrous Regiment.*

## Men left out of mixed bag

**Scum: Death, Destruction and Dirty Washing**  
Crucible Studio, Sheffield

The Paris commune (1870-71) is a long day's journey from the political consciousness of contemporary Britain, but it had a socialist purity (not unconnected, perhaps, with its short life) that keeps bringing propagandists back.

A company called The Monstrous Regiment (nice title for a fundamentally feminist group) gives us an entertainment that sees its events through the eyes of women workers in a Paris laundry.

It's a mixed bag. The arguments are clear and commitment is total but the theatrical grasp is variable — ranging from tight control to the frankly hysterical — and often the sound of axes grinding drowns attempts to

characterise and humanise the history.

And there are problems about a feminist company's treatment of history. One is practical: the commune saw great advances for women's political consciousness but great events remained largely in the hands of men, and these are only referred to rather inadequately, happening off stage, in C G Bond's script.

Another is ideological: a company "that will never contain more men than women" may redress the balance a bit but tends to create a further imbalance.

The Monstrous Regiment may find its range as limited as any Townwomen's Guild dramatic society: if socialism is to be believed in, it is surely indivisible.

PAUL ALLEN

# MONSTROUS REGIMENT

THE MORNING STAR. 17 MAY 1976

"OH, it's very good, isn't it Sir?" Sir nodded, very tentatively.

He was accompanying a band of 14-year-old Sheffield school-boys, dressed in their best togs, to an unlikely history lesson; the Monstrous Regiment's first play, a celebration of the women of the Paris Commune.

"Scum" or "Death, Destruction and Dirty Washing" not only provided Sir and his boys, and all the rest in Sheffield last week with a jammed account of how it all happened, but something else, too.

A rude review of the lives of women workers in Paris, "home of culture and the biggest knocking shop in Europe."

## INTERVENTION

These same women were to make an unnerving intervention in the fight for the Commune when Thiers' soldiers were sent to shoot out the revolutionaries, only to find themselves confronted with ranks of immobile women and children. They couldn't shoot.

These women had their own demands to make on the Commune, and the play shows, too, the very particular changes it brought in their own consciousness as women.

Set in a laundry we see the arbitrary rule of the proprietrix, a stiff woman who believes in "profit and the life hereafter," over grumbling, illiterate women who eke out a common sense, songs and consciousness in the course of their labour.

These are the scum of the earth.

## HORRIFIC SIEGE

Music and song are important and bold in this production, which opens to the strains of piano and spoons clattering against the washtubs as a very scruffy, scabby lady bounces out of a washing basket.

This woman is both clown and commonwoman, telling it to us like it is as the people, fighting the Prussian invaders and their own government, dig in during the horrific siege of Paris that preceded the Commune.

The workers fight over bread while the bosses nibble through their stores of sausage, "the great corrupter" and bottled

A scene from the Monstrous Regiment's production, "Death, Destruction and Dirty Washing."

cherries. While business collapses all around, Madame puts her faith "in god and dirty linen."

For 134 days the besieged people hold out, only to be betrayed by the "mighty midget Thiers" in a move that costs the people dear, and costs Thiers his government.

But there is yet more to say about this production which straddles agitprop and a finely tuned theatrical tradition.

"Scum" is not the best script in the world, but Monstrous Regiment transforms it by its wit, its awareness and its immensely skilful craft as able, committed and inventive actors.

The power of women is determining here, for Monstrous Regiment is a company of six women and two men, a feminist, Socialist company. And it shows.

## SKIRMISHES

Not only in the nature of the performances, but in how people receive the company itself.

The evening before opening in Sheffield, the company went to a pub where a customer nudged one of the men and muttered things like "Oh, ho, six women and two men, eh" nudge, nudge, wink, wink.

"It hadn't struck me because I've got so used to it, but that reaction blew me away a bit," said one of the men.

Constantly the company finds that arriving somewhere people naturally turn to the men, assuming that they are running it.

"What is occurring, of course, is that we are conducting the skirmishes to do with male domination in a day-to-day way. What we have to make clear is that we are not six women employed by two men.

## NERVOUS

"It is not very theoretical yet, but we are increasingly trying not to evade these problems," said one of the women, "or to have them blurred as they often are."

"It makes a lot of people frightened," said another. "It makes them nervous, a group of women being quite definite, not wishy washy."

There are tussles being worked inside the group, too. For example, when a car broke down, one of the women tried to fix it, and provoked the impatient ire of one of the men, to whom it was a great revelation that this woman was actually interested in mechanics.

They argued about it. "And the next day there was a lovely sight: two heads bent over the engine together."

## PROFICIENT

Monstrous Regiment is committed to producing gripping, proficient theatre. "There is a sense around the acting profession that the kind of work being done in groups like this is not to be sneered at, I think we are at a turning point," said one member of the company.

There is certainly a feeling that the subsidising agencies cannot refuse funds to the increasingly confident, small, radical companies, who know what they are doing both as actors and as committed people, and who are received by an increasingly expectant and welcoming audience.

PS: Would Mr. Ian Clarke of the Northern Arts Association mind reconsidering his decision not to welcome Monstrous Regiment to Newcastle? The regiment's "minority appeal," as he put it, only happens to be to at last 51 per cent of the population.

# Women and the Paris Commune

A new play which has been touring the provinces opens at the ICA, London, tomorrow night as part of the Socialist Theatre season. BEATRIX CAMPBELL reports.

Monstrous Regiment Limited  
4 Elder Street London E1 6BT

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Registered in England number 1332483

Registered Office: 49 South Molton Street London W1Y 1HE

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# MONSTROUS REGIMENT

MANCHESTER EVENING NEWS  
Friday May 26 1978

## Scum at the Library Theatre

WOMEN — bless their sined little bras — aren't just curvaceous sex objects or baby producing machines; they can actually think for themselves and have been doing so from at least the time of the Paris Commune in 1871.

That anyway is the claim of the fringe group Monstrous Regiment. And it would be a brave man indeed who dares to question the sincerely held beliefs of a company

formed specially because of dissatisfaction with the opportunities offered to women working in the theatre.

Scum—the show they've brought to Manchester's Library Theatre — is a pretty compelling piece of documentary which best puts across its twin messages of workers' rights and female emancipation when it concentrates on example rather than full frontal diatribes. It's set in a Paris

laundry and follows the involvement of the women there in the political events of the Commune.

It's an excellent production played with total commitment and considerable ensemble skill by a cast the programme refuses to identify. I found parts of the second half rather heavy going, but on the whole even a company run by men would be able to do little better.

ALAN HULME

Another perspective on history is provided by a new company, a work-sharing co-operative of unqualified excellence, Monstrous Regiment (formed out of a dissatisfaction with the opportunities offered women working in the theatre) who in *Scum*, *Death*, *Destruction* and *Dirty Washing* (ICA) show the 1871 Paris Commune from the washerwomen's point of view. The set is Madame's wash-house (read work-house) draped with the laundered linen of the elite (eventually anyone, for in hard times Madame as happily rips off brothel beds as the beds of her peers), in which the women drudge, up to their elbows in muck and stink (there's a beautiful Brechtian work-song), while their menfolk waste in Napoleon's imperialist war with Prussia. There is a Persil-bright clarity as to how the degradation and deprivation of the many supports of decadence of a few.

But out of the misery comes the Commune, "manned" by the women as much as the men, and though lasting a mere 58 days, still today symbolising what solidarity, born out of rat-eating desperation, can achieve. For the women it was an awakening of self and political consciousness recreated by Monstrous Regiment with period songs, period costumes and contemporary wit.

TRIBUNE

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## Scum — not for the lowbrow

The "Monstrous Regiment," a professional touring theatre

group spending a week in North Staffordshire yesterday presented "Scum" at the Burslem Leisure Centre.

"Scum" is a political drama depicting life in a commune of Parisian washerwomen during the Prussian siege of Paris.

Politics aside, the "Monstrous Regiment" are truly superb as a dramatic company. The production was excellent and the acting was totally convincing.

The documentary style of the show blended well with some fine music, and the visual presentation was thoroughly effective.

The company battled admirably with the poor acoustics of the hall and adapted to the rigours of touring conditions with professional ease.

So, if you want to admire an intriguing example of dramatic art, go along and see "Scum". But as an evening's entertainment, this show may not be for you.

STOLKE

R.P.H.

THE JOURNAL  
NEWCASTLE  
28.10.76.

## Revolution of the laundry ladies

FEAR, hatred, despair, excitement—that was the diet dished up at the Gulbenkian Studio theatre last night.

And it was a memorable experience.

"Scum" devised written and produced by the actors and singers who make up a new company with the unlikely-sounding name of the Monstrous Regiment, is one of the best productions ever staged at the Gulbenkian.

Set in the strife-torn days after the fall of Napoleon, the play traces the development of political consciousness of the working classes in France.

The awakening of the starving, poverty-stricken mass is mirrored in the struggle inside a laundry presided over by money-grabbing Madame Masson.

### Menace

As the menace from the invading Prussian army grows, the women workers are caught up in the revolutionary fervour which resulted in the setting up of the Paris Commune and the flight of the Republican leader Adolf "The Midget" Thier, to the palace at Versailles.

But you don't have to be a history freak to enjoy the gripping tale as it winds its way inexorably towards civil war and the massacre of the Paris workers by French soldiers.

Despite its stark political message, the play is full of vitality, humour and wit.

Every praise must go to the actors whose enthusiasm and professional skill carried the disappointingly sparse audience along for a good two-and-a-half hours,

and to the musicians who composed some very moving music.

The play is one of the finest seen in Newcastle for a long time — if this is fringe theatre, let's hope its here to stay.

BETH CHESNEY

*This review appeared in later editions of yesterday's Journal.*

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Catherine Itzin

NEWCASTLE  
EVENING CHRONICLE  
27.10.76.

## It's the poor people of Paris

*Scum*  
Gulbenkian Studio Theatre  
Newcastle

By MALCOLM GREY

ANOTHER emotive, romantically-stirring look at a revolution which failed—in this case the Paris Commune of 1871.

The all-encompassing full title of this presentation by the Monstrous Regiment Theatre Company is "Scum: Death, Destruction and Dirty Washing."

The scum are the poor who had the temerity to try to determine their own destiny after their betters had done a bunk. Dirty washing reflects the fact that most of the protagonists here are female laundry workers.

Monstrous Regiment is a company which will never contain more men than women. The current ratio is six to two for this work which described itself as a musical celebration of the women of the Paris Commune.

### Skilled

Inevitably Women's Lib sentiments are voiced but the main theme is that the Scum's day will eventually dawn.

However it would be a shame if any potential patron wrote "Scum" off as being purely a political diatribe.

It is a full, highly skilled and thoroughly entertaining theatrical experience.

The way the laundry workers learn of their economic exploitation is worked easily into the story line.

There are also instructions on how to use the barricades. Yet there is never any uneasy jolt into the didactic.

Before the final scenes evoking the horror of the reprisals, the production is full of humour and good heart.

There are some excellent performances during an evening which is at times quite moving and always totally involving.

# MONSTROUS REGIMENT

## Marching to drama victory

Bristol Arts Centre: Monstrous Regiment in "Scum," by C G Bond, Claire Luckham and the company.

The Monstrous Regiment have marched the length and breadth of the country, they say.

But last night was the first time they had set foot in Bristol — I hope it is not long before they return.

"Scum" is the off-putting name of their play, but it is the most exciting theatre I have seen in ages.

The company, all but two of them women, began in April and came together largely because they were dissatisfied with the opportunities offered to women working in the theatre.

### STIRRING

Their attitude is that if someone has got something to say, there is no reason why it should not be said by a woman just as effectively as by a man.

In "Scum" they certainly demonstrate the point. The play describes the struggles, the starvation and the political awakening of poor women working in a French laundry before and during the Paris Commune of 1871.

It is said, it is stirring and it is also very funny — for the great thing is that this is Women's Lib with a huge dollop of humour.

Unfortunately, Monstrous Regiment are giving only one more performance in Bristol, tonight, before setting off on their route march again.

QUITA MORGAN

BRISTOL EVENING POST 9-11-76

## Anguish ... joy re-created

Scum

Crucible Studio

THE MONSTROUS Regiment are a new theatre group, predominantly female as their clever title suggests, formed to provide women with a better deal in theatre.

Apt therefore that they should choose this period of French history — a time when "the weaker sex" began to sit up and pay more attention to politics, and what was happening around them.

The two-and-a-half hour piece is set in a laundry in Paris, during the Franco-Prussian War of the early 1870s.

It's entertaining, with plenty of humour to lighten some of the more up

The Workers, Fight For The Cause moments. The author, C. G. Bond, has peppered the script with many witticisms and clever lines, and is blessed with a natural comedienne in his group — but because they don't credit who plays which parts, she remains just one of a highly talented bunch.

The seven-strong cast (five women, two men), manage to recreate the feeling and atmosphere of those months. The poverty, hatred, anguish and occasional joy.

But don't think The Monstrous Regiment are re-hashing a piece of French history. There are plenty of heavy handed messages behind their words. — C.F.

SHEFFIELD

## COMEDY PLUS COMMENT

SCUM, DEATH, DESTRUCTION — AND DIRTY WASHING—Warwick University Arts Centre Studio, until Saturday (running time: about 2½hr.)

THE life of the exploited working class in Paris in the 1870s hardly seems suitable material for an entertaining, almost music hall type production.

Yet this energetic company, who call themselves the Monstrous Regiment, pull it off, lacing the comedy, singing and playing to the audience with the right amount of social com-

ment and dramatic acting. The group are predominantly women — they came together because of their dissatisfaction with the opportunities offered to women in the theatre.

This play reflects the war between France and Prussia and the siege of Paris through the eyes of the illiterate, starving women working in a laundry for centime a day.

Despite frequently breaking the train of action by stopping to sing songs or banter with the audience, each actress maintains and develops the character of her particular washerwoman.

The strongest of these characters is Mole—a winning performance ranging from pantomime dame to battle-hungry soldier.

Representing the exploiters, there is Mme. Masson, the owner of the laundry. This is another fine portrayal, with a nice mix of superiority with insecurity.

The cast's acting abilities are backed up by their musical talents. Guitars, drums and a piano are the main instruments used during the songs, some of which are based on songs of the period and some original.

A.L.

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# Scum of the Regiment is not what you think!

ONE of the pleasures of the theatre is the unexpected.

A play called *Scum*, *Death*, *Destruction* and *Dirty Washing*, performed by a company called *The Monstrous Regiment*, did not sound as if it would be much of an experience.

But titles and names are deceptive, and a thoroughly worthwhile evening it turns out to be.

The play tells, through the eyes of women working in a laundry in Paris, of an ill-fated uprising by the poor of the city in 1871 and the formation of a commune which lasted only 58 days before it was crushed by the establishment.

Not, perhaps, the easiest of subjects for what is described as "a musical celebration," but the company pulls it off.

Although the play does have a political message and plenty of

**PLAY:** *Scum*, *Death*, *Destruction* and *Dirty Washing* (Gardner Centre Theatre, Brighton).

**AUTHORS:** Clare Luckham, C. G. Boyd and The Company.

**STARS:** The Monstrous Regiment.

**DIRECTOR:** Sue Todd.

plugs for women's lib, it stays entertaining throughout.

The script is excellent and for the most part — until the closing scenes in which the com-

## By Phil Rich

mune is defeated — full of earthy humour.

The songs, with an accompaniment of piano, guitar and drums, are pleasant and not too many to drown the story.

The *Monstrous Regiment* was formed two years ago by a group of dissatisfied women working in the theatre. The cast

is predominantly female: six women to two men, in fact.

The acting is excellent all round and there are fine characterisations of a group of people gradually becoming politically aware — and aware that they have it in their power to try to change their destinies. The programme purposely lists only the names of the actors and actresses, not the parts they play.

In some ways that's a shame. For I should have liked to have known who played the laundry proprietress, Madame Mole, the cheekiest and funniest of the laundresses, and Lucy, the teacher forced through poverty to work in the laundry. They stood out in an evening of fine performances.

Although a trifle long — the play runs for 2½ hours — *Scum* only goes to prove that you can't judge a play by its title.

**RIGHT:** One of the Regiment's laundry girls.



WESTERN  
MAIL  
MAY 7<sup>th</sup>  
1976

## 'Scum' reflects the Regiment

TO UNDERSTAND *Scum*, the new play currently being performed at Cardiff's Chapter Theatre, one must first of all understand something about the company behind the production.

The *Monstrous Regiment* — its name is taken from John Knox's famous pamphlet of 1588 — was formed in December 1975 with the express purpose of providing more work for women in

### By SHYAM BHATIA

professional theatre. One underlying principle still is that the company should not contain more men than women.

The idealism behind the company's formation is also reflected in the choice of the present play, all about the Paris Commune of 1871, and even permeates down to the type of programme made available.

Actors and actresses' names are not set against the character parts because, so I was told, it would be unfair to give undue prominence to any one person when all actors are short of work.

*Scum* tells the story of the men and women of Paris, mainly women, who

establish a Socialist commune in their city after France's defeat at the hands of Prussia in 1871.

After the French army's defeat is confirmed, chaos replaces order in the city of light. Dirt and deprivation rule supreme, women sell their bodies for whatever they can get, and then, just as the commune begins to exert its authority, the old order minus the monarchy comes back in full strength.

This is a brave story, movingly narrated by a group of obviously talented and enthusiastic actors. Some of the images evoked by script-writer Claire Luckham are quite unforgettable, as for instance when Lucy teaches her child to pretend she is sucking sweets instead of pebbles.