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Sheffield Crucible Studio  
**JEFF NUTTALL**

**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 Liren 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 display this

*THE GUARDIAN  
"stunningly done"*

likely to be seen in the flesh in the Crucible for some long time. When they arrive the company will have achieved its real aim and we should have theatre indeed.

**TRIBUNE**

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 tips off broiled 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 mentolk wage in Napoleon's imperialist war with Prussia. There is a Persil-bright clarity as to how the de-gradation 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 r-acting 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.

Catharine Itzin

**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.

"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 unerring 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 "prouit and the life hereafter," over krumbling, illiterate women who eke out a common sense, some 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

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 midgit 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.

**MORNING STAR.**

17 MAY 1976

**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 a 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.

**It's the poor people of Paris**

Scum  
Gulbenkian Studio Theatre  
Newcastle

By MALCOLM GREY  
(Gulbenkian Studio Theatre)

ANOTHER genuine, 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. This fool!

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

It is a full, highly skilled and thoroughly entertaining theatrical experience. The *Monstrous Regiment* workers learn of their economic exploitation is worked easily into the story line. *The play.*

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.

NEWCASTLE CHRONICLE  
OCT. 76

**THE JOURNAL**

**Gripping tale of workers' struggle**

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 finances 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" Thiers 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 his here to stay.

BETH CHESNEY

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## ICA

### The Monstrous Regiment

DO WOMEN make better revolutionaries than men? The newly-formed theatre company The Monstrous Regiment evidently believes so, judging by the tone of their musical celebration of the women of the Paris Commune of 1871.

"Scum, Death, Destruction" Nothing of a genteel peacock nature, then, about this manifestation of people's power. But then one could not expect a company principally formed, as in this case, because of what is called a dissatisfaction with the opportunities offered to women working in the theatre, to pull their political punches.

The Daily Telegraph.

## THE GUARDIAN

MORNING STAR



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TIME OUT

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