

spare Rib



THEATRE

MONSTROUS REGIMENT

A new theatre group with a militant name will begin touring this summer with their first play, *Scum: death, destruction and dirty washing*, by C.G. Bond and Claire Luckham. The group formed late last summer, spurred on by a member's dissatisfaction with the limited opportunities offered to women in most plays — as true still of fringe/political theatre groups as of the commercial theatre and television. Theatre groups contain more men than women because of the way in which both historical and contemporary subject matter for plays are seen — with men in the forefront of the action, and women as secondary characters. Monstrous Regiment have as a basic principle a determination that the company will at no time have more men than women in it — indeed their first production has five women and two men, a salutary experience for the latter minority who have had quite a bit of flak from some of their friends for being in a female-dominated group.

The play itself spans six months in 1870—71, covering the period before and during the Paris Commune when the people of Paris declared self government but were finally defeated by the National Government of Versailles. It is set on women's territory — a laundry — and follows the women as they take part in the Commune, take over the laundry and run it cooperatively, making it also into a meeting place for the area. It is a demonstration not only of the very important role women played in the Paris Commune, but also shows what happens to individual women when political events make it possible for them to seize control of their own lives and relationships. The play has original music, is directed by Sue Todd, and from a brief

rehearsal preview looks to be vigorous, funny and hard-hitting. The small section I saw from the second Act corrects some of the prevailing myths about the political backwardness of women in history; under the Commune many of the demands women were making for themselves were as progressive as some of the demands the present feminist movement makes.

The play will be touring around the country, to Cardiff, Crewe, Cambridge, Newcastle, Liverpool, Sheffield, Exeter, Bath, Portsmouth, Edinburgh and Aberdeen. Look out for the group, even if your town isn't listed here. If you would like to find out about booking the play, please get in touch with Monstrous Regiment, 59 Camden Square, London NW1 (01-485 3860), who will negotiate fees with people and also give help and advice on how to deal with the administrative and organisational aspects of booking a theatre group.

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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 petticoat 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,



Sue Todd: Defiant.

Arise and act your role

YOU WON'T notice anything odd about the next play you go to, but that's just conditioning. "The average ratio's about six to two," the Monstrous Regiment sigh, filing their nails.

Actors, they're talking about, men to women. As always, one particular sex has cornered the goodies, leaving the birds to pick up the bit parts, the left-overs.

Slightly hard, this, on the other particular sex, seeing as it has always been in the forefront of every progressive movement, from the protest about the Highland Clearances to the Red Clydeside of 1917. Did you know Greenock women then staged Britain's first-ever rent strike?

Life, then, is a double twist to the nose for politically-conscious actresses, particularly when even leftist theatre groups like Belt and Braces are reluctant to stretch working class fables to include wifely laments. Sisters, unite and form your own company.

This Gillian and Mary and Sue and Chrissie and Helen did around the turn of the Year, borrowing their names from Protestant sexist John Knox (he applied it to our great-etc-grandmothers), and their material from Liverpool Everyman director Chris Bond and wife Claire Luckham.

Just to keep things in nice ironic proportion, two men were brought in—Roger and Alan—but the gents do dutifully stress that in "Scum: Death, Destruction and Dirty Washing" they are given very interesting parts—"that much more interesting than the minority parts girls get in traditional theatre."

"Scum" is based on the Paris Commune uprising of 1870, sweet nectar for people interested in female freedom. There we had communardes pressing for equal pay and nursery facilities as the Establishment troops bore down on them. More impressively,

We had female battalions, ungallantly slaughtered when the Establishment regained control.

BATTALIONS BUILDING

Monstrous Regiment sing, stunt and strut their way through this, effectively enough to pack more people into a week at London's Institute of Contemporary Arts than ever before. They've just had a week in Sheffield too, where they were delighted to find barmaids, cleaners, etc telling them how they'd been stimulated by the piece. Beware Sheffield, and the sexist Sheffield paper that headlined the review "Men left out of mixed bag."

Equal Ops? That's a joke. The bosses just reclassify jobs, and the Trades Union fraternity... well, equal pay has been an annual TUC resolution since 1887. An anecdote here about a colleague who turned up for a job on a building site and the foreman laughed solidly for five minutes.

They're hoping to encourage their own, female writers. Caryl Churchill is writing the next one, an examination of the ferocious repression of femininity—under the guise of witch-hunting—that the 17th century women were subjected to. It still lingers on today, they warn darkly. Gor, look at the ambivalent attitude to the sexuality of Dracula's birds.

They're hoping to take both "Scum" and the witch play to the 11th World Festival of Students in Cuba next year, an exciting prospect for all except Chrissie, who is obliged to eat fire for parts of the Commune production. "Still, it's good for facial hair," she philosophied.

● "Scum" goes on at Liverpool's I. M. Marsh College tonight.

**Erlend
Clouston**

Monstrous Regiment Th. Co.

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EXPRESS & ECHO

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Rare old treat

A RARE old theatrical brew is being seasoned and stirred for the citizens of Exeter—and it is timed to start bubbling over the pot in just 12 days' time.

DRAMA by DAVID
NICHOLSON-LORD

Whether the result is a dull hiss of disappointment or a sudden incandescent explosion remains to be seen. My own betting is on a hot touch of fireworks.

For the drama chiefs of the University and St. Luke's College have put their heads together to produce the city's first big dose of radical theatre — eight different shows by some of the country's best and most controversial alternative theatre companies.

That description is no exaggeration. Included in the programme are companies like 7:84—which made an impactive television debut with its

production of "The Cheviot, The Stag and the Black, Black Oil"—as well as the top touring company Foco Novo and a new women's liberation-oriented group, Monstrous Regiment.

The trouble is, of course, that many theatre-goers may find this fresh theatrical medicine rather hard to swallow. Is it not just a little radical for the average West-country man-in-the-street?

No, says Jeff Parker, a drama lecturer at Luke's and one of the organisers of the experimental season.

First, he says, the appeal of many of these groups belies their occasionally incomprehensible titles. It is direct, straightforward, and immediate.

Second, a bargain season ticket price of £4.50-£2.50 for students—is being offered for the eight shows in a bid to attract the audiences.

Third, Mr. Parker believes there is a real demand for this type of theatre in Exeter. "It is certainly going to appeal to the young people," he says.