Gentlemen Prefer Blondes

Glasgow Herald 13/2/80

Gold digging across America

Glasgow Citizens' Theatre: Monstrous Regiment in "Gentlemen Prefer Blondes," by Bryony Lavery, after Anita Loos. Directed by Angela Hopkins; designed by Mary Moore.

"ONCE," the company sing at the beginning, "she was all the rage, Now she seems strange — Fashions change."

They go on to announce their approach to the novel which, half a century ago and more, moved to slightly hysterical laughter readers on both sides of the Atlantic, and earned the encomiums of all sorts of eminent persons, from George Santayana to James Joyce (whose enthusiasms are duly quoted in the programme).

For the Monstrous Regiment, however, it is, or seems to be, a wholly serious matter, "a book about areas of life that women are denied access to."

Rather a forbidding start; but it emerges that this, in a way, is also a spoof. The company, specialists in taking the mickey, are also good at taking it out of themselves, and self-mockery is one of their weapons: what follows, more or less following the career of the once-famous Lorelei Lee on her incomparably gold-digging career across America and Europe, may not dispose of Anita Loos's unique deadpan mockery, but in its own way is also very funny, and very pointed indeed.

Song, dance-routines, a take-off of the silent movies, and anything else to their talented hands help the company to show Lorelei and her "unrefined" girlfriend Dorothy in the performance of their specialised form of social service — "I pick up anything dotty," says Dorothy, "and Lorelei cleans them out."

The pair are played in beautifully different styles by Mary McCusker as Lorelei, the essence of dumb-blonde cuteness with a steely glint in her eye and the slightly haggard look of long practice, and Gillian Hanna as the other, whose blunter weapon is "just goilish vivacity;" man after man is seen falling into their clutches and getting his deserved come-uppance.

That it is deserved is never in doubt. The Monstrous Regiment are in deadly earnest after all: for it may be that a high-class prostitute "preserves the status quo by making it look like fun," but the point of this excellent show is precisely that looks, even while you're laughing at them, are deceptive.

CHRISTOPHER SM...T

Presented by

MONSTROUS REGIMENT

GLASGOW CITIZENS THEATRE

feb 12 - 16 1980

sold out

Guardian 15/2/80

GLASGOW

Cordelia Oliver

Gentlemen Prefer Blondes

IF YOU feel put off by the idea of a feminist theatre company don't let your prejudice keep you away from the Citizens Theatre where Monstrous Regiment is in temporary residence with Gentlemen Prefer Blondes. A strange subject for a feminist group, you may well think, until you notice that the piece is credited to Bryony Lavery, after Anita Loos — a long way after.

Few lovers of the original will be offended, however. The skeleton of Lorelei's inimitable Diary is still more or less intact but given a galvanic twist by this engaging and talented group who sing and play and act and mime their way through what turns out to be a close-fought battle for the self respect, if not the soul, of Lorelei and her "unrefined" friend Dorothy.

To that end, the immortal pair are removed from their 1920s limbo, pastel feathers, fringes, diamonds and all. Encouraged to retell their story in a "cheap touring version," they overcome their initial reluctance to stay among these "rough girls and men with no money," and set to with a will but stubbornly resist all attempts to make them repent their poodle-like attitude to the Enemy, millionaire or not. The result is a draw: one of them turns out to be a feminist at heart, and the other goes back under the dust sheet: no prizes for guessing which one.

Lorelei and Dorothy are the constant factor in this freewheeling version. All the rest is conjured up out of thin air and a few props by the rest of the company — sometimes hilariously, and never less than graphically. The music is good, the jokes as in the original are double-edged, and the songs are clever and catchy — for example: I like old men, the older the better/ In this give and take of supply and demand/ With an old master/ You get to sleep faster.

LIVING IN THE COMMUNITY

CO-OPERATIVE COMPANY

John Knox, that stern, woman-hating Scottish cleric, gave them their name when in 1558 he wrote a famous, hard-hitting pamphlet called *The First Blast of the Trumpet against the Monstrous Regiment of Women*. Today Monstrous Regiment, a touring theatre co-operative made up of actors and actresses, musicians, writers and technicians, spends its professional life blowing the trumpet on behalf of women and showing its audiences, in theatrical terms, what it's like to be female in the western world today.

The company sprang into existence because of one woman's realisation, during the summer of '75, that women were being given a bad deal in the contemporary theatre. Gillian Hanna was working with a fringe group called the Belt and Braces Roadshow Company when they found themselves short of an actress to fill one very small part.

'We advertised in the trade papers,' she explains, 'and to our astonishment we were inundated with applications from incredibly talented women. They weren't just actresses, far from it. As well as being able to act many could sing, dance, or write. Some had even got their own one-woman shows.

'It was then that I began to think about the problems of the theatre today, and three things were absolutely clear. Firstly, there weren't many parts for women. Secondly, the parts that were available were often dull or insignificant, and never seemed to reflect what we understood as women's experience. And, thirdly, there was a huge pool of enormously gifted actresses chasing a few small parts.

Behind the glitter and glamour of professional theatre lies a tough struggle to survive. For women life can be especially difficult. Jennifer Curry discovered one company, pictured above in a scene from their new play, who took the situation into their own hands and came up with a dramatic solution

'All of us in Belt and Braces talked about the situation, and what a waste of talent it revealed. Then someone suggested, "Why not get together and have a women's group?" And that's how Monstrous Regiment began.'

Gillian and an actress friend, Chris Bowler, at once set to work sifting through the details of the women who had auditioned for Belt and Braces. They sorted out those who had the most talent and who seemed to be on the same wavelength.

'It took us months to get going,' remembers Gillian. 'To start with, we were scattered around all over the

please turn to page 10

MONSTROUS REGIMENT

CAN YOUR MAN COPE WITH YOU AND YOUR JOB?

LIVING IN THE COMMUNITY

continued from page 7

Members of Monstrous Regiment work together to solve a problem in the script

country. We spent hours on the phone discussing what we were going to do. There was no money at that stage. We kept talking about what we were going to call ourselves. We thought of all sorts of things and couldn't agree. Then Chrissie said, "I'm going off to order some headed notepaper, so we'll have to have a name," and we settled for Monstrous Regiment just like that. Everything was a battle at the time, so it seemed appropriate.'

The name, in fact, has been an asset because it's such a talking point. Many members of their audiences recognise the quote and enjoy the joke—though some have thought it was asking for trouble, implying that feminists were female monsters and proud of it.

The company make their sympathies with the women's movement quite clear. 'Our work explores the experience of women past and present, and we want to place that experience in the centre of the stage, instead of in the wings,' their handout proclaims.

But the company is not made up exclusively of women. Monstrous Regiment welcome men into their ranks, although because of the original purpose of their foundation, they insist they'll never contain as many men as women, and that women will always fill the major rôles.

One of the group's technicians is Veronica Wood, who is responsible for the lighting and sound in all the venues. Veronica continually finds she has to put up with patronising behaviour from men wherever she goes. But it's something she's learned to take in her stride.

'One day no one will be interested in whether the Prime Minister, the astronaut, the bus driver, the surgeon, the coal miner, the priest or the theatre technician is male or female,' she says. 'That will be irrelevant. All that will matter is whether he or she does the job well and enjoys it. But we're not there yet, not by a long chalk.'

The group's feminist ideology is also reflected in their choice of plays, many of which are specially commissioned from first-rate contemporary writers. A number of their productions have examined some of the darker episodes in women's history. *Scum* traced the activities of women laundry workers in the Paris Commune at the end of the 19th century; *Vinegar Tom* dealt with witchcraft; *Kiss and Kill* took a chilling look at domestic violence.

It all sounds very high-minded and serious—heavy stuff, you might think. But, in fact, the thing that strikes you most about Monstrous Regiment is their wit and their joy in life.

Music is used in all their plays and they have two sizzling cabarets, called *Floor Show* and *Time Gentlemen Please*, which have delighted audiences from one end of the country to the other.

At the centre of the music is Josefina Cupido, jazz composer, percussionist, singer and performer, whose work with the group has won her rave reviews.

'I used to be so dissatisfied with my work before I joined this group,' she says, 'singing mindless lyrics that meant nothing to me.

'Now my life is entirely different, partly because I'm involved with music that has some comment to make about the way people run their lives, but mainly because our whole lifestyle has given us the chance to work through some of these ideas. We've demonstrated that working together, sharing lives as a group, really does make sense.'

The others nod in silent agreement—it's amazing how often one member manages to express the feelings of all of them. 'But it's hard work,' adds Gillian. 'We spend so much time in discussion, thrashing everything out before we make a decision. Democracy is very difficult.'

But, clearly, democracy does work. The group is made up of an administrator, two technicians, two musicians, and five actors and actresses. There is no management body—all decisions are made jointly. Together they decide who will join them when there are vacancies to be filled; together they choose their venues, and the length of their tours; and together they work out their repertoire.

The practical jobs are shared, too. Since they have no stage manager, activities like putting up the set, scene-shifting, and organisation of props and costumes have to be taken on by the actors. And last, but not least, they share the money. In this company there is no star billing, and no star salaries are paid.

Like all touring groups, they find cash is in short supply, and the fees paid by the theatres, arts centres and schools where they perform are not sufficient to cover their bills for wages, publicity, costumes, props, vehicle hire, and all their other expenses. Fortunately the Arts Council provides a grant and a guarantee against loss without which they could not exist. Nevertheless, money is tight and they survive, cheerfully, on a shoestring.

Obviously their professional life is hard, but it's also immensely satisfying. What about their personal lives, I wondered.

I was met by a unanimous groan. 'Impossible!' 'Non-existent!' 'Disastrous!' they chorused.

Mary McCusker, one of the founder members, tried to explain what it was like to spend up to 23 weeks of every year 'on the road'.

'It doesn't exactly rule out relationships but it certainly makes them tricky. To start with, touring is physically exhausting. And then there's so little time. We try to get back to base about once a fortnight but often that's only for a day and a half.'

None of the present company has a husband sitting at home waiting, though some of them do have homes and gardens to look after. The way the group's set up at the moment makes it just about impossible for anyone with a child to travel with them. One of their first actresses had to leave when her little boy was 18 months because she didn't think it was fair on him.

But Gus Garside, their administrator, thinks that it could work, that it would be possible to accommodate actress-mothers if they could get the funds. 'It seems to me that if we had an extra member in the company who shared the rôles of stage manager and child-minder, we could take children with us until they reached school age. It's certainly worth trying.'

I wonder what John Knox would make of them. Maybe he's turning in his grave. But I'd like to think that the old fellow is sitting up there somewhere having a quiet chuckle at their latest extravaganza, *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, as it tours its way around the country this spring. If it comes your way, don't miss it.

If you'd like more information about Monstrous Regiment, you can contact them at 190 Goswell Road, London EC1V 7PE. Tel: 01-253 2172. For details of their current tour, *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, contact Gus Garside, Administrator.

For details of grants, awards or bursaries write to the Information Officer at the Arts Council of Great Britain, 105 Piccadilly, London W1V 0AU.

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Gentlemen Prefer Blondes
Written by Bryony Lavery

Gentlemen Prefer Blondes

THE GUARDIAN Friday October 26 1979

EXMOUTH

Allen Saddler

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Anita Loos's glorious send-up of the gold-digger is over 45 years old and, although relished of its sting by stage and film versions, does not down this method of survival in a man's world as a humiliating alternative. The show argues that Lorelei's pursuit of tangible assets through hooker may be effective, but that any means to an end lent much use in the struggle for equality. The script could have been sharper and maybe the production could do with a polish, and while the music is pleasant the lyrics are hardly sharp enough to cut diamonds, but the central idea to attack backsliding sisters at the roots is clever and an advance in subtlety for the group.

Gentlemen Prefer Blondes makes its point steadily enough, and is also entertaining, sometimes inventive and has two riotous performances from McCusker and Hanna. McCusker catches the scandalised innocence of Lorelei and almost completely covers the hard bitten interior, and Hanna is a continuous delight as a frumpy floozie with a jeweller's eyepiece always at the ready. Gentlemen Prefer Blondes is at the College of Art Theatre, Plymouth tonight and tomorrow and touring.

Time Out
NOV. 16-22 1979.

'Gentlemen Prefer Blondes' presented by Monstrous Regiment free adaptation by Bryony Lavery of Anita Loos' novel.
After the novel by Anita Loos—a long time after, as it says in the programme—Monstrous Regiment conjure up Lorelei Lee and her sidekick/mentor Dorothy as personifications of repressed womanhood in order to find out what makes them tick, expose them to the folly of their ways and raise their conaciousnesses a bit. The ensuing confrontation, delicate, witty and dazzling in its slick synthesis of dialogue, song and dance, whirls the performers deftly through scenes from Lorelei's life and loves in America and Europe. This action is interspersed with lively criticism and a questioning of Monstrous Regiment's own feelings towards Lorelei—most telling of which is their fear at her smybiotic relationship with the status quo. The play is very funny and excellently performed by the company's versatile actor-musicians. The more pity that it shies away from answers: Lorelei, miserable with her "successful" marriage and career, gets no comfort from her liberated sisters except the unoriginal message that even with nice men love is doomed, and it's up to her to seek out fulfilment.
(Ros Franey)

WESTERN EVENING HERALD, Saturday, October 27, 1979.

Musical satire on Roaring '20s is sizzler

THE Monstrous Regiment, a fringe theatre company assisted by the Arts Council, is appearing this week in "Gentlemen Prefer Blondes" at the Plymouth College of Art and Design, writes Harvey Crane.

The production is based very loosely on the novel by Anita Loos which caused a stir when it was published in 1925.

This version, a musical with the musicians taking speaking and singing roles, is an amusing satire on the roaring 20s.

The show pulls no punches with its two hookers out for business at the Grand Hotel where the boxed gold-diggers Loreli, alias Mabel Minnow, and Dorothy have designs on Gus the Button King or at least on his presents from Tiffany's, and it is only when real love comes into the plot that the explosion occurs.

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This sizzling production is extremely well performed and worth seeing.

WESTERN DAILY PRESS, Thursday, November 1, 1979—

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However, the two ladies (girls is out nowadays apparently) playing the parts of Lorelei and Dorothy, the two American 1920s hookers with hearts of cash, were splendid.

The between-the-wars social attitudes to women and the sordid background of the Great Depression were just lightly sketched in.

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Lorelei is a prostitute in 1925. She puts a little girl face on in the morning and lives to please men because she lives off men.

But in this snappy revue-style show she is visited by figures from sussed-out 1979 preaching women's lib.

Their scripted moralising interferes with the drama in a tiresome and obtrusive way at times but the emphasis is definitely on entertainment.

The traditional choice between marriage and career is gorgeously sent up in a boxing match between the man who will marry her and the man who will pay for her services.

Monstrous Regiment have a definite message but this isn't a man-hating show and closet chauvinists should come out and see it.

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Josefini Cupido gave a lovely quick changing series of performances in her role as at least a dozen characters. The production is all week.

HONOR WILSON

NCHESTER EVENING NEWS
Wednesday December 5 1979

Gentlemen Prefer Blondes

AS the economic hatchet comes down, only the better fringe companies will stand a chance of survival. The feminist Monstrous Regiment ought to be safe enough.

Previous shows from this source have been of a high standard and the latest, a contemporary version of Anita Loos's 1925 Gentleman Prefer Blondes, continues the tradition.

Diamond-hunting Lorelei Lee and friend Dorothy are catapulted into 1979 and find themselves involved in a touring version of the brassy blonde's diary.

Here Lorelei becomes the epitomy of traditional feminine wiles, preserving the status quo (to the natural disgust of the present generation) by manipulating it. And what does she get? The man, the money and position — but it's not enough. She's playing roles and the joke's gone on too long.

Mary McCusker's Lorelei is archetypal gold digger and none the worse for it. Gillian Hanna's Dorothy gratefully seizes the greater depth the script allows her; hard bitten and witty, she's also sad and searching.

The production is slick as well as good, there are a couple of decent songs and it's worth a trip to the Brickhouse, Oxford Road, Manchester, where it's playing all this week.

ALAN HULME

Gentlemen Prefer Blondes

Written by Bryony Lavery

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