

POLITICAL UPSURGE has its cultural counterpart, and the women's movement provides an eloquent example in publishing, photography, music, writing, other visual arts and particularly theatre.

And one of the leading theatre groups to come out of the alternative theatre movement during the last ten years also happens to be a feminist group, Monstrous Regiment — well known round Britain and at political gatherings of the left.

After more than four years of hectic touring and recently a lot of argument over ways of presenting new images of women, the group has been taking a breather.

Founder member Gillian Hanna says the collective needed a change. "We even had to ask ourselves whether we should go on or stop."

EXCITING

Fortunately the group, which on principle always has more women members than men, decided during a thoughtful summer that it would continue, but in a more flexible way.

The result — a new season of plays and a move this week to new premises. Both are exciting departures for the group.

Monstrous Regiment will be presenting through to the spring three new plays, all from abroad.

They are designed, says Gillian Hanna, to "give a taste of



Chris Bowler and John Slade from the Italian two-hander called "Dialogue Between a Prostitute and One of Her Clients."

what has been going on in other countries."

The first is a two-hander from Italy called "Dialogue Between A Prostitute And One Of Her Clients" by Dacia Marani and translated by Gillian Hanna who came across it two years ago on an Arts Council-funded "fact-finding" trip when she saw it performed at the Madelena in Rome—Europe's only permanent women's theatre.

Funny but disturbingly ambiguous, the play is not a documentary about prostitution but an exploration of sexual relations and the balance of power between men and women.

The play is broken in two places when the characters ask the audience to discuss the issues raised, a debate which

Bold group is back

COLIN CHAMBERS, Star theatre critic, reviews some new plays by Monstrous Regiment after their long absence.

continues after the play has finished.

Time will tell how valuable this experiment turns out to be, though audiences have to be prepared to take part — something perhaps they should have more control over, otherwise the experience can become oppressive and self-defeating.

The questions discussed are controversial, particularly the implication that a prostitute does for money what a wife or lover does without payment — an extension of the "wages for housework" argument?

Sex is a difficult subject to talk about in public, especially with a mixed audience who have never met each other before.

However, Ann Mitchell directs Chris Bowler and John Slade with a sure touch, achieving a discreet understatement that is quite compelling.

Second in the season is "Shakespeare's Sister" by Theatre de L'Aquarium, also discovered by Gillian Hanna, on her way to Italy.

Taking off from a passage in Virginia Wolf's "A Room of One's Own" in which she imagines what might have hap-

pened to a sister of Shakespeare's, it uses visual rather than primarily verbal images to explore the world of four brides and two grandmothers (played by men) and includes interviews with women confined to domestic work.

At one point, it links with Monstrous Regiment's first show, "Scum," which was set in the Paris Commune, when it recalls the role of women in the French revolutionary tradition.

CANCER

Last is an American play, "Mourning Pictures," by poet Honor Moore — so big a success off-Broadway in 1974 that it transferred to Broadway itself.

Mourning pictures were popular in the early 19th century, especially in New England, and were stitched or painted by young women for bereaved friends. The scene was often the survivors at the gravestone.

The play centres on a woman dying of cancer and the way her daughter and family react in coming to terms through poems, songs and dialogue with mortality.

Whereas "Shakespeare's

Sister" will have a three-week run in London during December, "Mourning Pictures" will tour next year, as "Dialogue" is doing now, though to smaller venues, with dates fixed in Bristol, York and London (details from 01-253 2172).

The group, however, will be better able to function now from its new base in London's East End—a five-storey warehouse not yet fully in working order that used to be a storage space for builders' merchants.

Although cramped conditions will no longer be a problem, the economic one remains. Last year, the group received nearly £41,000 from the Arts Council but the treadmill of production took its toll.

The council also finds it harder to understand the ways of a co-operative, which takes all its decisions through an often lengthy process of full company meetings.

"But," says Gillian Hanna, "we are still committed, and politics still informs all our work, whatever the difficulties," — good news, indeed, for all those eagerly awaiting the next visit from these bold pioneers.

If you're a man, keep out!

By DAVID HARRISON

Men will be barred from a Bristol theatre on Thursday at the request of one of Britain's top fringe theatre companies, it was announced today.

Monstrous Regiment, a largely feminist group which attracts capacity audiences in Bristol, is playing at Bristol Arts Centre for five nights from tomorrow.

The production is *A Dialogue Between a Prostitute and One of Her Clients* by Dacia Maraini — the British premiere of a highly-praised Italian feminist play.

But today the Arts Centre announced that, at the company's request, Thursday night's performance will be for women only.

Arts Centre press officer Sara Geddes said: "This was the company's decision. We have already had quite a few complaints from people and we shall be talking to the company today to find out why it wants to do this."

RIGHT

Arts Centre manager Mr Reg Allsop said they had the right to refuse admission under normal conditions of ticket sales.

John Slade, the Monstrous Regiment actor who takes the part of the prostitute's client, said: "We have a policy of having more women than men in the company and we do plays based on women's experience, and sometimes we do performances only for women."

"We are playing for five performances in Bristol and we felt there would be less likelihood of any men having to miss us than in places where we have a shorter run."

"Men are more than welcome on the other four nights."

The play includes discussion with the audience and some people feel women would be less embarrassed to join in if no men were present.

SEX STORM PLAY FOR SOUTHAMPTON



Councillor Hampton

A CONTROVERSIAL play about prostitution, which caused riots when it was performed on the Continent, is to be staged at Southampton's Nuffield Theatre as part of the debate on the city's red light district.

By **BRIAN WHITE**

The X-certificate play, called "Dialogue between a prostitute and one of her clients", features explicit language and nude scenes.

It also provides an opportunity for the audience to join the arguments taking place on the stage.

The development of the play depends on how they respond.

City councillor Mrs Paulette Hampton, who has campaigned to clean up the Derby Road "red light" area, is backing the performance.

"It covers an area of wide public interest and I really believe it could be a worthwhile evening for those who go along.

"The subject is treated in a responsible and sensitive manner and while there is some strong language and one nude scene, it is all very much within context.

"I don't think it should shock or upset anyone — and of course because it involves audience discussion it will give people with strong views — either way — the opportunity to get their point across," she said.

Nuffield general manager Mr. Roger McCann said that a theatre should reflect life in the community. "Southampton over the last year has been the centre of a national debate and we are delighted that the theatre is able to provide a forum for that debate to continue."

The play, by Italian author Dacia Maraini, is performed by Monstrous Regiment, a feminist company.

In the play, the prostitute asks whether there is any difference between the contract a prostitute has with her client and that which a wife has with her husband.

The client's reply is: sex is one thing — marriage is something else.

The performance, on Monday, January 19, starts at 8pm.