

THEATRE

REVOLUTION, TERRORISM AND LIFE

A group of middle class 'terrorists', and a regime in crisis: Italy 1981? Argentina 1976? Uruguay 1971? No, Russia 1881. ROS ASQUITH previews the latest play from **Monstrous Regiment**.

In 1976 I was sent to Cardiff to see an unknown play by an unknown group. Bleak day, nowhere fixed to stay overnight, it seemed like bad news. The play was unenthusiastically titled 'SCUM... death, destruction and dirty washing'. I had visions of Valerie Solanas. The group was Monstrous Regiment. The rest, to theatre enthusiasts at any rate, is history.

That play transferred to the Institute of Contemporary Arts for a packed out run, and dealt with the women of the Paris Commune. Interested to discover that the group were a collective, intrigued that they were committed to search for, and to commission plays which had a predominance of women's parts, and knocked sideways by the performance, I wrote 'this is political theatre at its best'.

Even gazing down the years in-between, it's a production that—with its vivacity, ribaldry and memorable music—remains brightly etched on my memory. Six years on the Regiment have many distinguished (and some not so) productions under their belt.

This week they open, again at the ICA, with Melissa Murray's 'The

Execution', a play whose scope is broader than anything they've attempted since that original blaze of talent, and it deals with a similar theme. This time the women of pre-revolutionary Russia come under scrutiny: middle-class women who thought they could educate the workers and peasants, discovered things weren't so simple and, with their male comrades, convinced themselves that terrorism was the answer.

The climax of the play is the 1881 plot to assassinate Tsar Alexander II. His son Nicholas was the Tsar swept away by the Bolsheviks in 1917. The play seeks to grasp the moral and political problems of reformism versus revolution versus terrorism versus personal life. It's an intriguing subject since the position of Russian women at the time was worse even than in Europe. Entirely at the mercy of their husbands and fathers, middle-class women had just achieved the possibility of a limited amount of study abroad when an edict from the Tsar bade them return home on the basis that too much free thought was a danger to the state.

Nevertheless liberal opinion was



Gillian Hanna, Denise Arman: regulars in the Regiment.

on the rampage. The serfs had recently been freed, but their freedom—without the land they had grown up on—was a sham. So middle-class liberals turned to revolution and women such as Sofiya (who threw the fatal bomb at Tsar Alexander) were in the vanguard. Naive, privileged, fiery, apparently unaware of the possible backlash provoked by their actions, they denied themselves the gentler emotions in the pursuit of an ideal. And they changed the course of history.

How Monstrous Regiment will tackle so wide a canvas remains an open question, but they've plenty of talent on their side. Gemma Jackson, whose designs for Snoo Wilson's 'Flaming Bodies' and for Monstrous Regiment's 'Shakes-

peare's Sister' were among the most imaginative the fringe has seen over the last few years, has opted for a vast, simple, parquet-floored set.

Sue Dunderdale—who has just finished a stint as associate director with the Royal Shakespeare Company—directs and there's an original sound tape from ace improvising musician Lindsay Cooper. As well as some new faces the cast (eight of them playing 35 parts!) boasts old hands Mary McCusker, Chris Bowler and Gillian Hanna, whose performance in 'SCUM...' was of Rabelaisian proportions. Which is where we came in.

'The Execution' by Melissa Murray previews at the ICA from Tuesday. See *Theatre: Fringe* for details.