

MONSTROUS REGIMENT

THEATRE / Reviews of a feminist version of *The Maids*

Le Mans 24-hour nightmare

My Sister In This House
Haymarket, Leicester
Paul Taylor

THIS BRILLIANT production hits you like a breath of stale air. At the end, you rush from the theatre as though you had just spent two hours trapped in an unusually confining broom-cupboard. The play recounts the real-life tragedy that occurred in Le Mans in 1933 when two young sisters, maids in the stifling and neurotic bourgeois household of Madame Danzard, battered to death their employer and her daughter, Isabelle.

This story inspired Jean Genet's play *The Maids*, but here Wendy Kesselman returns to it to explore the complex and disturbing inter-relations between female solidarity and mutual oppression — how women can support and devour one another by turns. Christine (Suzanna Hamilton) and Lea (Maggie O'Neill) are lucky to find jobs in the same household when they are both employed to look after Mme Danzard (an hilariously unhinged Maggie Steed) and her pettish daughter (Tilly Vosburgh).

At first the arrangement suits both parties well, since Christine and Mme Danzard are joint sticklers for excellence. Gradually, though, the power-relations within both pairs begin to look sinisterly similar. Mme Danzard feeds vulture-like off Isabelle, whom she keeps under virtual house-arrest.



Who's the most evil of them all?: Suzanna Hamilton and Maggie O'Neill

Christine's more understandable protectiveness towards Lea has comparable drawbacks for the younger girl. When she persuades Lea to stop visiting their mother and handing over her wages, the advice is, in the abstract, good, but is unhealthily prompted by Christine's emotional grudge against her mother and desire to have Lea all to herself.

She, too, uses clothes as bribes, and seals their bond in a cumbrously official photograph. The physical relationship they develop, in an effort to wrest affection from a loveless world, has touches of the vampirism that afflicts Mme Danzard's relations with Isabelle. In presenting the Danzards as stereotyped bourgeois grotesques and Christine and Lea as all sensitivity, the play tricks you into siding with the sisters, but slowly

makes you realise that, in feminist terms, such class-based discrimination is invalid.

The director, Nancy Meckler, creates an atmosphere of unbroken tension and foreboding where the upsetting of a vase of flowers can seem like the end of the world. And the beautifully compact set by Stephanie Howard, which cramps scullery, dining and drawing rooms, and the girls' attic into one small space, makes you all the more aware that, eerily, each group prowls round the other without addressing a single word until the hysterical confrontation moments before the killings. The acting of all four women (members of Monstrous Regiment) is excellent, and this hypnotically gripping production is not to be missed.

At the Leicester Haymarket until 25 April. Box Office: (0533) 53021

THE INDEPENDENT — 7th April 1987

Monstrous Regiment Limited
123 Tottenham Court Road London W1P 9HN
Telephone: 01-387 4790
Registered in England number 1332483
Registered Office: 49 South Molton Street London W1Y 1HE
Charity number 274517
Directors: Ms C Bowler, Ms S J Bailey
Ms G L Hanna, Ms M McCusker

MONSTROUS REGIMENT

Monday April 6 1987

ARTS GUARDIAN

LEICESTER

Pat Ashworth

My Sister. . .

IN THE hands of Monstrous Regiment, Wendy Kesselman's exploration of the bonds of sisterhood, is as sensitive as you could wish. It's a brave director who can allow silence to dominate a play, but at the Haymarket Studio Nancy Meckler's pacing is so confident that the heavy silence suppressing so many undertones of emotion is more disturbing than the grisly murder which is the climax of the play.

The subtleties of Stephanie Howard's sets and Veronica Wood's lighting reinforce an illusion that you're seeing the events of the household distantly as if through a skylight.

The play is based on a bizarre crime in Le Mans in 1933 which scandalised French society with its revelations of the "abnormal" relationship between two maids, sisters Christine and Lea, that drove them to murder their employer and her daughter. The two pairs live separate lives, conversing only with each other until the final, dreadful confrontation.

Suzanna Hamilton as Christine, emotions bound as

tightly as her braids, meticulously carries out the ritual of the household chores with a tight-lipped passiveness that Madame Danzard takes for subservience, while Maggie O'Neill gives an equally disturbing performance as Lea, a frightened child demonstrating a welter of only half understood passion.

As Isabelle, Tilly Vosburgh displays resentment of her mother's suffocating presence in every silky move, even the set of her hair angry, but it is Maggie Steed who delights, wearing a beatific smile and moving at a tilt as though conforming to half remembered deportment lessons.

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MY SISTER IN THIS HOUSE REVIEW - JOHN FLORENCE - RADIO LEICESTER

3 April 1987

MY SISTER IN THIS HOUSE is the name of the play which has just opened at the Haymarket Studio. It's being presented by one of Britain's leading feminist theatre companies, "Monstrous Regiment". MY SISTER IN THIS HOUSE tells the true story of a ghastly murder which took place in France in 1933. Grim subject matter ... but does it make an enjoyable play? Here's John Florence with his review.

If one of the functions of drama is to take us into unsuspected worlds of human experience, to let us feel and understand things in ways we otherwise wouldn't, MY SISTER IN THIS HOUSE discharges this function in an overpowering fashion. It's a play which draws us unresisting into the claustrophobic lives of Christine and Lea, the maids, and Madame Danzard, their mistress, and her daughter Isabelle. Madame's world is bounded by stultifying social convention and oneupmanship, it's a vacuous and small minded existence. The convent educated sisters on the other hand retreat steadily into erotic absorption with each other, all they've got in their world is each other. Until the last minutes of Wendy Kesselman's remarkable play not a word is exchanged between Madame and maids but then the worlds collide with appalling consequences. It sounds a cliché but I in the company of the rest of the audience left the Studio at the Haymarket, stunned:

"I thought it was excellent, very moving, they were very disturbing performances but it held you.

"It was absolutely amazing, it was .. words cannot describe it, it turned from funny to tragic in one fell swoop, quite amazing."

"Aaagh ... I haven't got over it yet so I haven't really formed an opinion but it was really quite terrifying at the end."

"But you enjoyed it?"

"Yes in a fashion, yes."

"The difference between the second part and the first part is quite stunning. And the end is absolutely frightening."

As I hope I have made clear, this is an extraordinary production of an extraordinary play. One of its virtues is that it is not a wordy piece and, especially in the first half which is rooted in the domestic routine of the household, actions speak louder than words. And what actresses there are to perform those actions, Suzannah Hamilton, Maggie O'Neill, Maggie Steed and Tilly Vosburgh, all turn in faultless, high definition performances which compel total attention. Nancy Meckler's production is played out against a substantial, beautifully detailed, split-level set designed by Stephanie Howard, and the whole evening is sensitively lit by Veronica Wood. The pity and terror of this play will, I am sure, remain with me for a very long time. Something wonderful is happening in the studio - get your tickets now - before the rest of Leicester's theatre going public finds out!

THEATRE

THE HEAT OF THE DAY
Sheffield Crucible

Elizabeth Bowen's very literary novel as drama? Not easily, I thought. Wrong. **Shared Experience**, always so brilliant at adaptations, bring out wonderfully its theatricality with a sensitive script by Felicity Browne and Giles Havergal.

It's elegiac September in blitzed London. A double plot: Stella's love affair with Robert Kelway (who turns out to be a spy) brooded over by the sinister Harrison, government agent tailing Robert who falls for Stella; and Louie, the naive soldier's wife, protected by ARP warden Connie. The theme of a fractured England is emphasized by Robert's meaningless stockbroker-belt childhood and Louie's griefs. Everyone is rootless.

The set is an inky-blue interior evoking black London, with a backcloth suggesting the lurid glare of the blitz. Feet crunch over autumn leaves and glass shards. At once we're in Bowen's world of devastation and glamour. We hear George VI's clipped, nasal tones over the radio, the howling banshee of the air-raid siren, and jump out of our seats at the sound of a 'direct hit'. Then, the peaceful wing-beats of Louie's swans anticipating Bowen's memorable final moment. The two plots are cleverly rationalized by lighting - they sit together better on stage than in the novel, in fact. We watch the romance of Stella (not sexy enough, frankly) and the raffish Robert being preyed on by Harrison. We see

Robert's empty past, a gallery of photographs guarded over by his fiendish mother (splendidly emphasized here by Patricia Lawrence). But above all we are pulled into the plight of Louie, whose painful innocence and sexual waywardness are miraculously caught by Charon Bourke, and her exasperated new friend Connie.

Whereas men prove to be hollow in Bowen's novel, the adaptation emphasizes the strength of women. It's a strength that is undergoing healthy social change. From the Medea-like Mrs Kelway, then the cool poise of Stella, we come to the New Woman in the boiler-suited Connie. War throws up strange connections: the moving moment of real contact between Stella and Connie; the sisterly support Connie gives the hapless Louie. The novel is Stella's tragedy; the play, Louie's triumph. When she holds her baby up to the swans at the end it's a Chekhovian moment. Bowen would have liked that.

SHEILA GRAHAM

MY SISTER IN THIS HOUSE
Haymarket Leicester

Le Mans 1930 the rain unmercifully forces us all to remain incarcerated in the claustrophobic opulence of la maison de madame Danzard.

This is the 'other' version of the true story on which Jean Genet based *The Maids* - this time by Wendy Kesselman and performed by Monstrous Regiment. In 1933, two sisters, Lea and Christine, were charged with and found guilty of the brutal murder of their mistress,

Madame Danzard, and her daughter, Isabelle after several years of loyal service.

It should be emphasised that **My Sister in This House** is not Wendy Kesselman's adaptation of *The Maids*. Instead she has gone back to the source and looks differently at the relationship between the two sisters exploring in greater detail the reasoning behind the murders. The result - and comparisons are inevitable I suppose - is tender and sensitive where Genet's is intense and passionate. The sisters, played by Suzanna Hamilton (Christine) and Maggie O'Neill (Lea), are forced into service by a money grabbing mamon. After years of moving from house to house they are eventually placed together at the Danzards where Christine sternly but lovingly protects Lea her younger, clumsier and prettier sister.

The sisters are primarily just delighted to be together but especially after relations with their mother completely break down they come to resent the mistress who takes up valuable time they could be spending with each other. Their respect for the exacting but reasonably fair Madame Danzard develops joltingly into a hatred of what they see as a harshness to their love for each other.

Maggie Steed plays the wonderfully meticulous and ridiculous Mme. Danzard. The dust is checked for under the table by her white glove, which covers the steel hand and pushes and pulls her sulky daughter into womanhood. I found it strange that her French Ma'am is uncannily reminiscent of the Margaret Thatcher figure she played in *Sink the Belgrano*, but it certainly added credence and justification to the murtherers.

The play is made up of two very separate plots: the sisters' story and the Danzards' story. Their interaction is through silent and sleekly choreographed moves around each other and through overlapping conversations.

The set divides, the text divides and although the divide is the crux I needed further development of the servant/mistress relationship to make the eventual murders both understandable and shocking. It's all a bit too calm and the final attack which takes place, symbolically, on the stairs - the link between the two worlds - too abrupt. An understated relationship tying Lea and Isabelle and the rather beautifully-clumsy development of a sensual bond between the sisters accompanied by the haunting melody 'Sleep my little sister sleep' manage to override the stultifying set and the text's obsessive attention to detail.

But while the oppressiveness of the situation was well evoked by Nancy Mackler's direction, the action became so internal and inwardlooking that I felt shoved out onto the Le Mans streets and was quite surprised to find I hadn't been drenched by French rain but could only look forward to a Leicestershire soaking.

BRIDGET SMITH

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SUZANNA HAMILTON AND MAGGIE O'NEILL IN MY SISTER IN THIS HOUSE



Photography: Phil Cutts

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LEICESTER MAIL

Poignant look at horrific murder

AN ENLIGHTENING portrayal of a horrific 1933 murder — that's *My Sister In This House* at the Haymarket Studio.

The play explores the relationships of four people who live under one roof but have very little communication and poignantly expresses the tensions that arise, writes Sarah Pilkington.

An incestuous relationship between two sisters is portrayed in a humane light and the audience is left with an understanding of how the servants could murder their mistresses and the mysterious mutilations that took place.

A delightfully intricate set brings a fascinating realism to the play.

You really should witness this passionate drama for yourself — and be moved by the brilliant acting of Suzanna Hamilton and unusual direction of Nancy Meckler. *My Sister* runs until April 25.



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ARTS



Suzanna Hamilton and Maggie O'Neil in *My Sister in this House* at the Triangle.

Monstrous Regiment

at The Triangle, Gosta Green
In 1933 France was shocked by the frenzied murder of a woman and her daughter by their two long-serving maids.

The murder inspired a well known play, Jean Genet's *The Maids*, but the American writer Wendy Kesselman has returned to it to produce her award-winning play, *My Sister In This House*, here receiving its British premier.

The production mounted by Monstrous Regiment in association with the Haymarket Theatre, Leicester, is really first class.

Stephanie Howard's compact but substantial set vividly evokes a suffocating middle-class interior of the period, in which

Madame Danzard (Maggie Steed) keeps her daughter Isabelle (Tilly Vosburgh) an exasperated prisoner.

Two parallel stories unfold, the sterility of life downstairs where the extreme of excitement is cheating at patience, and the increasing introspection of the maids — devoted sisters turned lovers — in the garret.

The two pairs of women inhabit entirely separate worlds, even though they crowd so close together as to stifle each other.

The play is cleverly constructed so that lines are never exchanged across the class divide until the final catastrophic confrontation.

As the sisters, Maggie O'Neill and Suzanna Hamilton suggest a relationship which sets off not far from the brink of mania and eventually slips over.

All four actresses give fine performances under Nancy Meckler's sympathetic direction.

It is a pleasure to see such high quality touring theatre in the city and sad to think that the Triangle's future as a theatre venue is under threat. The play continues there tonight and tomorrow.

TERRY GRIMLEY

GLASGOW HERALD

WEDNESDAY

MAY 20th

Mitchell Theatre,
Glasgow

TONY PATERSON

My Sister In This House

BASING her play on the French provincial crime of the early thirties when two maid servants apparently murdered their mistress and her daughter with appalling brutality and no motive, Wendy Kesselman explores none of the obvious ways of treatment. Detail is meticulous, but any kind of physical violence is minimal, and the climax is a cacophony of sound, followed by a taped voice giving the sentences. The play ends with a chilling snatch of a nursery song.

The undercurrents become gradually obvious as the years pass, and we become familiar with the passionately devoted sisters, and the infuriatingly precise lady of the house locked in

a stifling relationship with her daughter. Dialogue cross-cuts from side to side of the split stage, the conversations of one pair often echoing those of the other. The desire to dominate and a fierce jealousy warp both couples, and there is one remarkable scene where mistress and older sister share emotions for a moment as they watch the younger maid sensuously brush the daughter's hair.

Monstrous Regiment has brought an impressive contribution to Mayfest. Nancy Meckler's production, potent in silence as well as speech, is impeccable of its kind. Maggie Steed, all angular refinement as the mistress, Tilly Vosburgh as her daughter, gauche but anxious to reach out, are brilliant foils to the darkly and deeply felt sisters of Suzanna Hamilton and Maggie O'Neill. There is a splendid composite set lit in a highly atmospheric manner. Don't expect the catharsis of great tragedy, but be prepared to admire the precise analysis of the crime's ambience.

Hampstead

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THE CRITICS

A woman's place

Theatre: NOAH RICHLER

WENDY KESSELMAN'S prize-winning *My Sister in this House* now playing at the Hampstead Theatre, is a superb piece of theatre. It is brilliantly written, beautifully acted and forcefully and tastefully directed.

This is straightforward, classic drama: a set which does nothing but be what it should, an intricate and well-crafted script, four fine parts for women (the *Monstrous Regiment* is an all-women theatre company) and four suitably special performances.

The play is based on an historical incident which occurred at Le Mans in the Thirties. It is the story of two sisters, Christine and Lea, working as maids in the house of Madame Danzard and her daughter, and the very French kind of crime which ensues.

Kesselman's script exposes terrible duplicities, and the heavy weight of secrets, silence and relationships (between family and between classes) impossible to repair. She makes the house an awful prison where everyone is doing time.

Mm. Danzard wipes the surfaces with a white glove on to check for dirt, but the trouble in this house runs deeper than that. The atmosphere is oppressive, and ultimately

violent. You end up jumping at nothing: a knocked-over vase, a maid out of uniform, a stolen sweet.

This is a sort of "House of Bernarda Alba meets *Upstairs, Downstairs*," set in a chilling Northern European context. Written by a woman, it is far superior to Lorca's play.

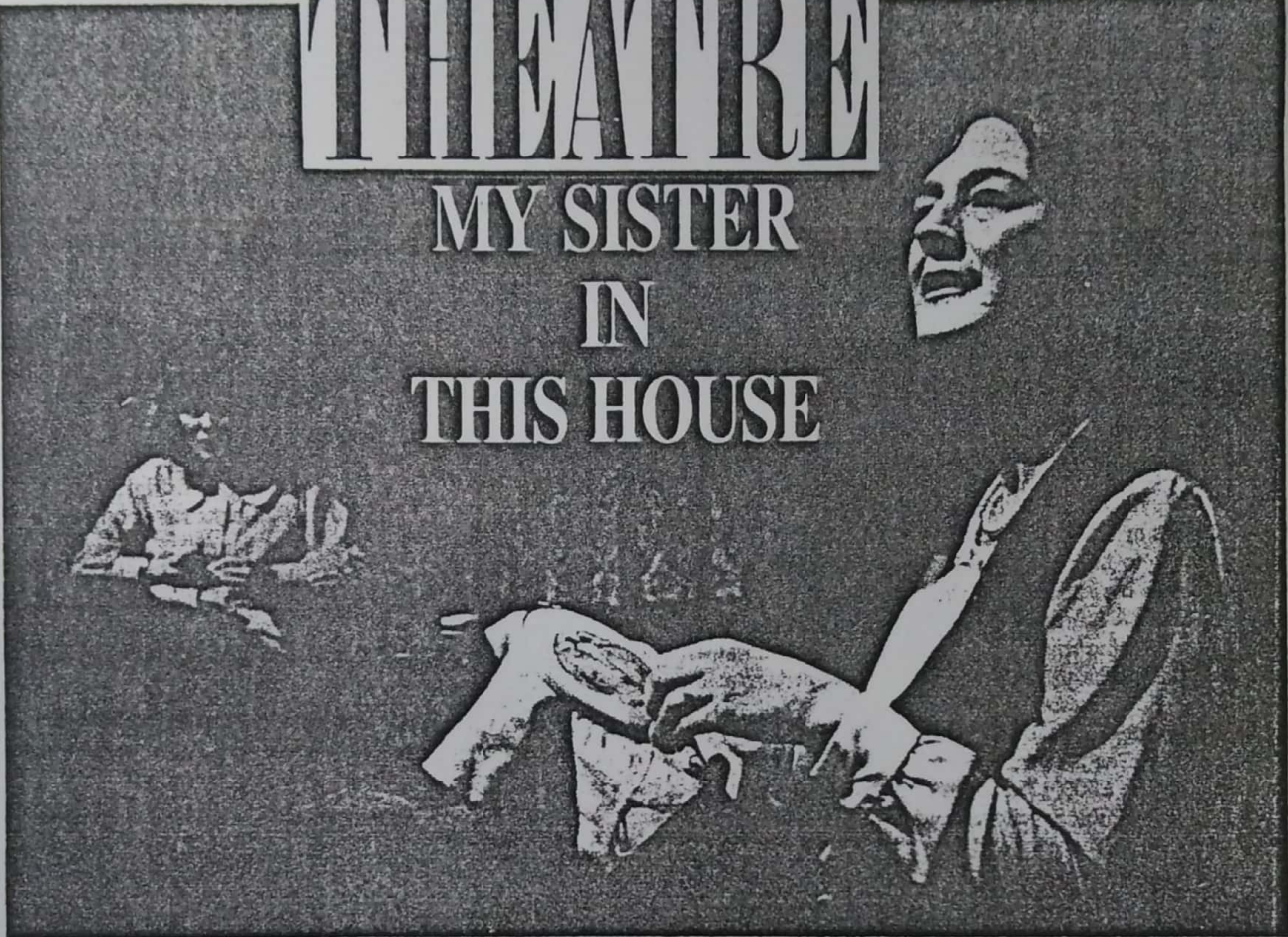
Suzanna Hamilton is excellent as the elder sister, deeply disturbed and unhappy. She captures the sister's distraught control perfectly, as miserable for her anger as she is for her restraint.

Timely

Maggie Steed's Mme Danzard is wonderful. She is at once harrowing and amusing and, perhaps unwittingly, gives the play a timely political coincidence. Her Mme Danzard sometimes bears an inescapable resemblance to another Maggie, and not just in her appearance, or occasional mannerism; ostensibly sweet, Mme Danzard is thorough, intolerant and domineering, and completely indifferent to mean wages.

This is an excellent evening. How exciting it must be to be part of the *Monstrous Regiment*. It makes me want to be a woman; I'd have skipped the queue to sign up.

THEATRE

MY SISTER
IN
THIS HOUSE

Once again the Hampstead Theatre, Swiss Cottage NW3 (Box Office: 722 9301), has staged a fascinating piece of drama to follow its award winning productions of the previous year, "Orphans" and "Observe The Sons Of Ulster Marching Towards The Somme". Don't be put off by the outward appearance of the theatre building (a cross between a Portacabin and a giant grey shoebox!) or the idiosyncratic box office (it pays to telephone in advance). What matters is that you would hardly be able to find a more engrossing play at any other venue in London.

Wendy Kesselman's script is based on an event that occurred at Le Mans, France in 1933, when the Papin sisters (Lea and Christine) brutally murdered their employer, Madame Danzard, and her daughter, having served them for six years as domestic servants. At the time, no motive was discovered for the gruesome slaughter, which was accompanied by the terrible mutilation of the corpses, but the trial of the maids did reveal the injustices of their situation and employment.

It would seem that anyone who has

considered the case has endeavoured to develop an individual theory. Jean Genet saw the slaying as part of a bizarre ritual, while Simone de Beauvoir viewed it as a symbol of social/political unrest. Wendy Kesselman takes the line that the murder was a result of an incestuous relationship between the sisters, which flashed in to violence after years of smouldering like a dormant volcano. She may or not have hit upon the true interpretation of the crime, it really does not matter. What is important, however, is that her idea has produced a truly unnerving drama, which draws its audience into a claustrophobic world, trapping them there until the horrific climax is reached.

Equal importance is given to both pairs of women by the play's Director, Nancy Meckler, which is appropriate, since the employers are as much the victims of sexual repression as their servants are. All four actresses take their parts quite superbly, investing them with a sense of reality that can rarely be found. The love shared by the two sisters is conveyed simply and without fuss by Suzanna Hamilton and Maggie O'Neill,

who play Christine and Lea respectively. Both of these young actresses catch the essence of their characters perfectly, pointing out the contrast between the staid practical Christine and the sensual spirited Lea. The part of Madame Danzard, mistress of the household, is taken by Maggie Steed, who is probably best known for her television work, (which includes "Fox", "The History Man" and "Shine On Harvey Moon"). In this role, she is compelling, and gives it an almost birdlike quality with her intricate and genteel rituals, (she puts on a white glove in front of the servants, running it along the woodwork of the furniture, in search of dirt and thus the sisters inefficiency). Her daughter Isabelle (Tilly Vosburgh) has the soul of a mutinous monkey, constantly plotting rebellion against her mother, but never daring to execute her plans.

"My Sister In This House" is a singularly powerful play, which not only seeks the motives for an horrific crime, but makes some telling statements on the position of women in society at the time.

BY MARK ABBOTT



The sadistic sisters

MADAME DANZARD (Maggie Steed) moves through her house on a quiet street in Le Mans like a woman overwhelmed by the exquisiteness of her own good taste and anxious to disturb the least possible amount of air. Ladylike and angular, she alone determines the correct tone of each moment in the day, and consumes the veal prepared for luncheon by the new maid as though she were playing the word game in 'Hay Fever,' lyrically.

Christine (Suzanna Hamilton) is a triumph to flaunt among her peers in the town. Madame's daughter Isabelle (Tilly Vosburgh) is anything but lyrical. With her frizzy hair and poor posture at table, Isabelle hums in fearful dissonance over the piano and clatters noisily into her lunch like a half-starved bird whilst complaining that veal is really too heavy for the middle of the day. Isabelle, sulky and malicious, is Madame's cross in life. Lea (Maggie O'Neill) is Christine's, but also her joy. Impulsive, affectionate, pretty and shy, Christine's younger sister is trained in the rules of the house and learns to jump like Christine, to the imperious ring of Madame's little brass bell. The sisters, themselves in flight from a greedy and indifferent mother (unseen) become lovers and grow careless in their cold little attic room. Madame, excited by their obedience hitherto, becomes dismayed by their growing presumptuousness.

Wendy Kesselman's *My Sister in this House* (Hampstead) is based on the historic double murder case of 1933 from which Genet drew 'The Maids.' Driven by the unspeakable life of service and the provocations of their employers, the girls tear them to pieces with a sudden and extreme ferocity described here in court transcriptions at the blacked-out climax to the play.

A Monstrous Regiment! Leicester Haymarket production, it is a piece about the trapping conventions of womanhood, the consolation of craftsmanship and the irreversible accumulation of despair. It is extremely well-written, if about 15 minutes too long, brilliantly directed by Nancy Meckler and played by a quartet ensemble as good as anything in London this year. It is a rare pleasure to see a show so well run-in.

The four women of Le Mans inhabit a claustrophobic environment in which the celebration of rites is paramount and all ritual objects—napkin and sewing basket, pestle and pewter vase—have their place. There is the ritual of pitcher and bowl at the top of the

THEATRE

'My Sister in this House'

at Hampstead Theatre,

Vaclav Havel's

'Temptation'

at The Other Place

MICHAEL RATCLIFFE

house before six o'clock in the morning. There are the small rites of suppressed gaiety as the ladies of the house neat-foot it alone to Offenbach or dance-music on the wireless. There are rites of association.

Organ music naturally puts Madame in mind of God and so to the proper cleaning of her house by Lea and Christine. Watched by the girls and putting on a white glove like an exploratory surgeon, she tests the intimate unseen surfaces of the furniture for dust, a sequence of tiny triumphs until she pauses half way up the stairs. The fervour with which her hand sets to work on the offending balustrades suggests, perhaps, that other rites are subliminally disturbing her mind. All this is done with a breathless delicacy and wit.

Meckler, who directed a memorable *Macbeth* at Leicester, with Julie Walters and Bernard Hill, is exceptionally good on time and space and sound. Tension mounts in the second half of Kesselman's play to the drip of a wash-house sink. Hairpins clatter to the bedroom floor as the sisters make love in the late afternoon and the enraged ladies, expecting the preparation of food, climb the stairs towards their door. Christine, her hair loose for the first time in the play, defies them on the landing in an ecstasy of spontaneous courage as if she had become a girl again. All four actresses are superb, but Miss Hamilton within is heartbreakingly good, holding her gravity the complete injustice of the story and grief of the play.

Vaclav Havel's *Temptation* (Other Place), translated by George Theiner, is a troubled but exuberant piece that takes the Faust legend as a point of departure for a far from entirely fantastical comedy based on Havel's own experiences when first imprisoned by his fellow Czechs in 1977. He began to learn unpleasant things about the nature of self-knowledge and truthfulness, and to believe that he was being tempted by the Devil's power.

Prague is, after all, the historic home of hermetic philosophy.



Suzanna Hamilton as Christine and Maggie O'Neill as Lea.

literature and the necromantic arts and, when Dr Foustka (John Shrapnel), a scientist at a state research institute, chalks a pentangle under his carpet, lets forth cabalistic cries and explodes a foul smelling blue flash, there are three knocks on the door and Fistula (David Bradley), shuffles in. Claiming to be a spirit who can aid Foustka in his exploration of black magic, Fistula looks like a cross between a French Resistance veteran and a disabled bug. He is plausibly unorthodox, carrying a plastic bag from which he extracts slippers for the comfort of his cheesy old feet.

Around these encounters, promises and bargains imperfectly

struck revolves an institutional world poisoned by every shade of treachery and sycophantic sententiousness. There is no need for the Devil when Devil's advocates abound, or when there are still women and men. Traps are sprung for the Doctor. Beneath the world of soap rationing, rotas for feeding the pigeons and promotion-seeking displays of technological kitsch, the dark heart of Bacchanalia beats.

The end is both riotous and disarming. Roger Michell's direction simmers a rich and entertaining brew and Shrapnel's compromised protagonist is a perfectly judged component of absurdity, intelligence and genuine distress.

The Sunday Telegraph May 31 1987

THEATRE

Cousins in love

FRANCIS KING
on "The Two Noble Kinsmen"

THE ARGUMENT against accepting Shakespeare as co-author, with John Fletcher, of *The Two Noble Kinsmen* (RSC, Mermaid) is that the superficiality of much of the characterisation and the clumsiness of much of the plot are beneath him. But the play, so full of memorable lines, is no worse than another collaboration between Shakespeare and Fletcher, "Henry VIII", and better than "Cymbeline."

The story is of two cousins, Palamon and Arcite, whose almost amorous attachment to each other turns to bitter rivalry when, captured in battle by Theseus, they glimpse Hippolyta's beautiful sister Emilia from their prison window. A subplot concerns their gaoler's daughter, who is driven mad, in the manner of Ophelia, by her unrequited love for Palamon.

It is unlikely that an imperfect play will ever receive a production that comes closer to perfection than Barry Kyle's. Both Bob Crowley's sets and costumes and the stylised simplicity of the climactic scenes of war and love derive from Japanese theatre. Four or five supple poles, wavering from side to side, represent a forest. Shimmering bales of cloth, unrolled across the stage, or coloured cords, pulled taut across it, artfully suggest temporal, spatial and even psychological divisions. A battle is conceived as a ballet, with the warriors surging forward to the insistent pulse of Guy Wolfenden's thrillingly evocative score.

mance as the gaoler's daughter from Imogen Stubbs, who brings to the role a subtlety and complexity missing in the text. Gerard Murphy and Hugh Quarshie make an effectively contrasted pair of kinsmen, even if the former's Palamon is more plebeian than noble. Whether by accident or design, Peter Guinness's Theseus amusingly suggests Malcolm Muggeridge in his prime.

★ ★ ★

IN LE MANS in 1955, two maids, convent-educated sisters, hacked and tore their mistress and her daughter literally to pieces in an act of frenzied violence. This *folie à deux* has already inspired one play, Jean Genet's coruscating "The Maids." Now it has inspired Wendy Kesselman's sombre *My Sister in This House* (Hampstead).

I should guess that Nancy Meckler's superb production has much to do with the stunning impact of this play. Except at the climax, all the scenes between the maids and the ladies are wordless, to suggest the social gulf that divides employers and employed. Yet skilfully orchestrated by Miss Meckler, every surreptitious glance, every tentative gesture betrays how ravenously these symbionts feed on each other.

As the mistress of the house, her grey, towering angularity suggesting a rhea, Maggie Steed gives a performance wholly memorable in its preening grotesqueness. Tilly Vosburgh as the twitchingly neurotic daughter, and Maggie O'Neill and Suzanna Hamilton as the two sisters, one childlike and ardent and the other steely and repressed, are no less striking.

★ ★ ★

IT IS extraordinary that, in the decade of Noel Coward's "The Vortex" a play vastly more



Morris Newcom

Suzanna Hamilton (left) and Maggie O'Neill in "My Sister in This House" (Hampstead)

lies of the Twenties, namely Ferdinand Bruckner's *Pain of Youth*, should have appeared in Austria. It is even more extraordinary that a work so powerful should only now be having its first performance in this country, at the enterprising little Gate in Notting Hill.

Suffering from a psychological hangover after the prolonged orgy of the First World War, Bruckner's youthful characters seek ever more drastic remedies—in nihilism, in gratuitous acts of cruelty, in perverse sex, in drug-taking. Their leader and destroyer is an older man, Freder, a disciple of Nietzsche, who brings to monstrous birth the devil in each. By the close, he has induced one of their number to become a street-walker and another to kill herself and his himself.

His person as irresistible as his evil credo, this character is virtually impossible to make convincing. But Tim Woodward, his eyes glittering hypnotically, does marvels with him. Sylvia Rotter, often reminiscent of Garbo in her height, her gawkiness and the expressive beauty of her deep voice, plays the woman who at the close begs Freder: "Murder me! Murder me!". As the cocaine-sniffing aristocrat who eventually finds the oblivion that she desires in an overdose of veronal, Joanna Pearce conveys a hard-edged quivering neurosis with playwright skill.

With Patti Love's direction imposing an increasingly frenetic rhythm on this morbid dance of death, Bruckner's stature is convincingly demonstrated. The *obscure* triumph

Hampstead

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THE CRITICS

A woman's place

Theatre: NOAH RICHLER

WENDY KESSELMAN'S prize-winning *My Sister in this House* now playing at the Hampstead Theatre, is a superb piece of theatre. It is brilliantly written, beautifully acted and forcefully and tastefully directed.

This is straightforward, classic drama: a set which does nothing but be what it should, an intricate and well-crafted script, four fine parts for women (the *Monstrous Regiment* is an all-women theatre company) and four suitably special performances.

The play is based on an historical incident which occurred at Le Mans in the Thirties. It is the story of two sisters, Christine and Lea, working as maids in the house of Madame Danzard and her daughter, and the very French kind of crime which ensues.

Kesselman's script exposes terrible duplicities, and the heavy weight of secrets, silence and relationships (between family and between classes) impossible to repair. She makes the house an awful prison where everyone is doing time.

Mm. Danzard wipes the surfaces with a white glove on to check for dirt, but the trouble in this house runs deeper than that. The atmosphere is oppressive, and ultimately

violent. You end up jumping at nothing: a knocked-over vase, a maid out of uniform, a stolen sweet.

This is a sort of "House of Bernarda Alba meets *Upstairs, Downstairs*," set in a chilling Northern European context. Written by a woman, it is far superior to Lorca's play.

Suzanna Hamilton is excellent as the elder sister, deeply disturbed and unhappy. She captures the sister's distraught control perfectly, as miserable for her anger as she is for her restraint.

Timely

Maggie Steed's Mme Danzard is wonderful. She is at once harrowing and amusing and, perhaps unwittingly, gives the play a timely political coincidence. Her Mme Danzard sometimes bears an inescapable resemblance to another Maggie, and not just in her appearance, or occasional mannerism; ostensibly sweet, Mme Danzard is thorough, intolerant and domineering, and completely indifferent to mean wages.

This is an excellent evening. How exciting it must be to be part of the *Monstrous Regiment*. It makes me want to be a woman; I'd have skipped the queue to sign up.

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Parallel drama

THEATRE

My Sister In This House Hampstead

Based on the same French provincial murder case of the early 1930s which Genet took as his starting point for *The Maids*, Wendy Kesselman's play is about what Genet left out.

The basic story is one of harsh domestic exploitation rebounding on the head of the exploiter. Mme Danzard engages the two sisters on the cheap, and works them like beasts of burden; they then kill her and her daughter with the greatest brutality. Genet's version substitutes a suicide pact and focuses on the girls' compensation fantasies. Miss Kesselman, an American author who knows her Balzac and Flaubert, concentrates on the detail of domestic servitude: the soulless repetition of each day's unvaried tasks and inspections, conducted in iron silence on both sides as though each were invisible to the other.

It is a drama of parallels. Just as the girls were ill-used by their vampire mother, so young Isabelle Danzard has

her blood sucked by the monstrous Madame. There is also a shared code of conduct, observed with fierce pride by the mistress and by Christine (the elder sister) who speak of each other in almost identical terms. And there is an erotic parallel between the pathetically unmarried Isabelle (Tilly Vosburgh) and the girls who escape from servitude into incestuous rapture. When the mistress transgresses the code by speaking and attempting to invade their private world, they claw out her eyes.

At its 1981 performance in Louisville, the play was marvellously reinforced by the orchestration of domestic sounds to ritualize the commonplace. In Nancy Meckler's Hampstead production, chopping boards and knives remain strictly functional properties, and the play sinks back into naturalism; with the result that the girls seem perversely taciturn, and the loquacious Madame (Maggie Steed) unbalances the action by blossoming into a comic grotesque.

But the piece is strong enough to survive that uncertainty of tone; and the central partners, Suzanna Hamilton and Maggie O'Neill, are in firm command of the inflammable sub-text.

Irving Wardle



Drama is served: Maggie O'Neill in Wendy Kesselman's award-winning *My Sister in this House*

My Sister in this House/Hampstead

Michael Coveney

With a Genet retrospective looming at the Barbican, Wendy Kesselman's casebook drama undresses *The Maids* and presents the raw material of the bizarre domestic fracas and double murder perpetrated in *Le Mans* in 1933.

The play was seen at the Louisville Festival a few years ago and is, by the prevailing standards of that alleged "hot-house of new American drama," quite exceptional. By most other standards, however, it is merely average. Nancy Meckler's scrubbed, authentic production marks a triple decker collaboration between Hampstead, the Leicester Haymarket and *Monstrous Regiment*. Like a comparable feminist murder psycho drama about Lizzie Borden, the piece retraces a famous crime through a double perspective of historical recreation and contemporary sensibilities.

So we see the two convent girl sisters, Lea and the older Christine, shaking off strict school and domestic background and finding Sapphic companionship while resentfully waiting on the Madame downstairs. Madame's unseen man in Genet is here replaced with hunched, dowdy daughter (Tilly Vosburgh). The two contrasted couples are pinned against Stephenie Howard's neat split level design of parlour, hall, bedroom and kitchen. As they overlap and interlock, hats are tried on, photographs taken, neighbours outfaced, new clothes fitted. It rains, a vase of flowers is knocked over, the sisters kiss on the bed, the quartet rumble on the stairs, a voice-over at the trial recounts the grisly details of gouged eyes and knife wounds.

In spite of the play's cool, blanched intentions, the best moments are Genetesque, as when Maggie Steed as Madame Danzard lubriciously caresses the banisters with a white-gloved hand in order to indicate an unwanted film of dust; or when Maggie O'Neill's doe-eyed Lea pulls on a new night dress for sisterly approval. The production makes much less of

other Genet echoes—the pulling on of black stockings, the brutal brushing of hair—deliberately, perhaps, but coyly.

The scrubbed approach will not deny the comic instincts of Miss Steed who bears, in this incarnation, an unsettling resemblance to George Logan's piano playing Dr Evadne Hinge. When the play is on the verge of stagnating, she whips up excitement over a card game. She also elides tiny movements into a pleasant plasticity, expressing delight with the servants as she folds a white napkin over her breast and switches her attention to the sewing basket. Her performance is clever, but coarse, and it

belongs to a different and undoubtedly preferable play.

Elsewhere, this crane-like specimen of the provincial bourgeoisie stifles her enjoyment of Offenbach on the wireless, flattening the table-cloth over-emphatically as her cowed daughter peers round the door. These gestures, as drama, are insufficient substitutes for theatrical muscle and one ends the evening wishing the play would either get a move on or pinch a few excesses from its outrageous prequel. Miss Kesselman's sociological fact-finding is neither interesting nor resonant. The writing fails to sustain the investigative ambition.



Maggie Steed and Tilly Vosburgh

Alastair Muir

Theatre

My Sister in This House
(Hampstead)

Blood sisters

Christopher Edwards

Wendy Kesselman's play is based upon the same notorious French murder case of 1933 that inspired Jean Genet's *The Maids*. Two young hard-working sisters, Christine and Lea, are taken into domestic service by an oppressive *petite bourgeoisie* called Madame Danzard. The action spans the period between the start of their employment, in 1927, and their sudden, ferocious massacre of Madame Danzard and her daughter Isabelle. The killings themselves are related to us, from a blacked-out stage, as readings from the court transcript of the girls' trial — a dramatically effective climax. The court record deals with these gruesome details in classically sober, matter-of-fact terms, which are far more shocking than any enactment on stage could hope to be. Why did they do it?

The reasons are not that easy to state, but this is not to suggest any failure on the part of the playwright or in Nancy Meckler's direction. The production gives a vividly realised sense of two claustrophobic, parallel female worlds. Both are highly ritualised, each fascinated with the other, but they never touch. Indeed, communication of any sort is minimal; no words of instruction are delivered by Madame Danzard to the sisters. Meals are brought in and served in silence. Once the sisters have left the room, Madame and her graceless daughter fall upon the veal, and wonder at the girls' efficiency, skill and utter apartness. Madame's domestic authority is imposed through a number of ritual inspec-

tions, again conducted in complete silence. She checks for dust by slipping on a white glove, rubbing it in obscure crannies, and flourishing it before her daughter's nose like a conjurer; everything is spotless, at least until the very end. This particular rite is charged with sexuality, most obviously in the way Madame handles the carved balustrades. It also fires the repressed instincts of her daughter when she, in private, allows Lea to slip the glove on to her hand and brush her hair. This latter scene is one of the rare instances where the two worlds do touch. Indeed, you are made to feel that the tension is so great that they must touch but that when they do some tremendous ignition will take place. And of course this is just what happens.

But it is actually part of the haunting quality of this piece of drama that a gap always remains between the emotions of the two murderesses and their fearful retribution — if that is quite the word to use. Nothing about the numbing routine of their existence, nor their intense, overtly incestuous intimacy, can quite explain the attack. The two girls are eventually disturbed in bed by the return of Madame Danzard and her daughter, who expect the door to be opened when they ring, and their meal to be ready. Madame threatens to come upstairs to their tiny room, a private place which fascinates her but which she has never entered. Christine, her hair down for the first time in the evening, confronts her on the stairs. With her hair up she has always seemed most severe, tightly controlling her feelings. With it down she seems both girlish and maenadic. Throughout the entire six-year period of their association, these two women have hardly uttered a word to one another. Madame Danzard's route to the bedroom is barred by Christine in what comes over as an almost ecstatic act of courage. And then the two girls fall upon their employers like animals devouring their prey.

The success of the production depends upon its delicate and precise ensemble acting. The smallest gestures are eloquent — the daughter (Tilly Vosburgh) dropping a sweet-wrapper back into the bowl is a bold act of filial defiance; in a photographer's studio the change in Lea's (Maggie O'Neill's) eyes from fear to flirtatious smiling suggests a whole other life that she might have lived in the world outside. Suzanne Hamilton is the grave and very moving elder sister Christine, while Maggie Steed plays Madame Danzard — a performance that discovers comic eccentricity in the least likely material.

This is a delicate production, whose

slight dramatic opportunities are woven together by a subtle creation of mood. It absolutely requires the claustrophobic closeness of a tiny auditorium like the Hampstead, which is the place to see it before (as you would imagine) it transfers to the West End.

