

My Song is Free

... at The Triangle,
Birmingham

Fear of the unknown immediate future broods over a candle-lit Chilean prison cage. Slow torture or sudden death could be the fate of any of the four women inside.

But against this all-embracing background are the shades of uncertainty which are even less palatable companions.

Self-doubt, mistrust of others, the suspicion that there is an informer in their midst, jostle in an overpowering alliance within the dark and claustrophobic confines, where every footstep heard beyond the door heralds a possible new threat.

When martial music is heard, the women know it is hiding someone's screams. Every time the cell door opens, the possibilities are frightful.

The play, unlovely but compelling, is by the Chilean dramatist Jorge Diaz. Susan Todd's production for

Monstrous Regiment finds its strengths in stark and minimal lighting, long shadows, meagre furnishings and a proper attention to the clipped, uncompromising dialogue.

The prisoners — working-class activist, frightened pregnant girl, middle-class woman and newly-tortured actress — are a hotchpotch of humanity.

In the hands of Maureen Morris, Yolanda Vazquez, Angela Bruce and Stella Maris, they respond to their situation, to their imaginings and to each other — sometimes with white anger, sometimes with compassion, sometimes with suspicion and fear.

"You have fallen off the face of the earth! You have disappeared! You no longer exist!" The words ricochet in a chilling shock wave.

But the violence always keeps it distance. It stays in our imagination — and it makes strong meat all the stronger.

JOHN SLIM

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THE BIRMINGHAM POST

6th FEBRUARY 1986

MONSTROUS REGIMENT

LEICESTER MERCURY, TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 25, 1986 23

Courage in the shadow of death

Four women facing torture and the prospect of death is the subject explored by "My Song is Free" by Chilean playwright Jorge Diaz.

Staged at the Knighton Drama Centre, this British premiere, performed by "Monstrous Regiment", is based on a true incident.

The first in the centre's season of plays about women, it examines the story of four women locked inside a concentration camp in an atmosphere of tension and fear.

The four actresses, Maureen Morris, Yolanda Vazquez, Angela Bruce and Stella Maris gave unforgettable performances that explored what the horror of revolution in Chile meant to four individuals, united by their sex and their struggle.

Why they had been imprisoned, what crime they were thought to have committed and the relationships that developed were analysed with a stark reality.

And politics aside, the message that unfolded most powerfully, sym-

bolised by the birth of a child and the death of its mother, is that the struggle for freedom would go on.

This very powerful performance, from a touring theatre company with a cast of only four, was directed by Susan Todd.

— Jackie Chambers

Monstrous Regiment Limited

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Registered in England number 1332483

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Charity number 274517

Directors: Ms C Bowler, Ms J Cupido, Mr G Garside

Ms G L Hanna, Ms M McCusker, Mr J Stade

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■ **'My Song Is Free'** by Jorge Diaz,
presented by Monstrous Regiment (Drill
Hall)

This is a serious play about a serious subject: the imprisonment and torture of the 'disappeared' in Latin America. Four 'desaparecidas'—all very different, each with their own horrifying story to tell—share a cell into which a seed of distrust has been sown via an anonymous warning that one of their number is a traitor. Intimacy between the women is strained by suspicion and constantly invaded by the demands of faceless prison authorities, but a mixture of desperation and hope maintains some of their fighting spirit. With an imposing stone door and grey bars, the cage-like set gives a physicality to the bird/freedom imagery in the text. Strong performances are emphasised by an almost cinematic use of lighting, and huge sound effects make this both physically and emotionally powerful theatre. (Alix Lee)

● C I T Y L I M I T S 7-13 MAR 1986

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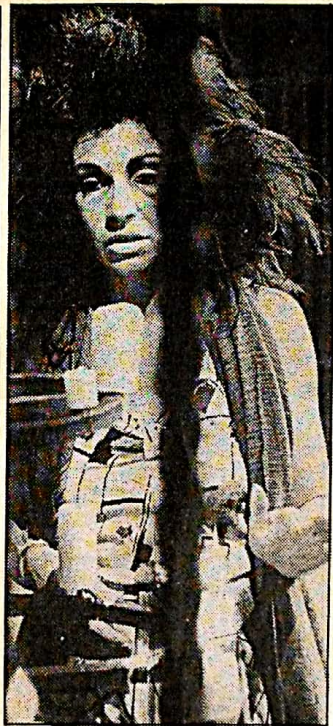
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FRINGE

'My Song is Free' (by Jorge Diaz, Drill Hall)

'They will find out — but they *won't* care'. So, you thought the action had moved from Chile to El Salvador or Nicaragua. That Chile was yesterday's cause. Well, you thought wrong. For along comes this harrowing account of four women who 'disappeared'. And there is every reason to suppose that their likes still rot in jail, under continual threat of torture and gripping fear of betrayal. It's said in Chile, that once arrested you should withstand torture for at least 48 hours in order to give your friends and comrades, your 'companeros', time to go into hiding. But who, in reality, could last even 48 hours? 'Companera' also means sister, and inside the prison the women taste more of sisterhood than they do of terror. Susan Todd directs unhysterically and her firm control of the play's moods is matched by Veronica Wood's expressionistic lights. The cast are uniformly excellent — Yolanda Vazquez's cry on behalf of her newborn child will haunt for a long time. But really, it's so trite to reduce this experience to the level of a 'good' review. It is good; it's so bloody good you'll wish you hadn't gone. But go, you must. (Christine Eccles)



Sing a song of freedom — powerful, harrowing, unmissable stuff at the Drill Hall.

96 TIME OUT MARCH 6-12 1986

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directed with tough confidence by Susan Todd, is an invaluable evening's theatre. On a dramatic level, it is less so.

Diaz's script is so obsessed with its own brooding atmosphere that it rarely generates either tension or character interest.

Every five minutes or so, the door at the back of the ornate circular prison, with its whiff of the Inquisition, swings slowly open.

Smoke swirls in the harsh white light, and the voice of an unseen male persecutor shouts commands (accompanied by a surprisingly high level of taped hiss).

First time round, this is a powerful and menacing effect, Tenth time round, even with Veronica Wood's acutely calculated lighting, it has become as monotonous as oblivion itself.

The quartet of actresses — Maureen Morris, Yolanda Vazquez, Angela Bruce and Stella Maris — showed heartening commitment to Diaz's nervous staccato dialogue, with its unending question marks. They thankfully avoid obvious feminist points about male persecution which other, less experienced women's theatre groups might gleefully inject.

But they cannot help making heavy weather of the last half-hour. The final rallying cry — "Freedom begins when you shout, not cry" — comes far too late.

S.McL.

Theatres

Sheffield Crucible Studio: "My Song is Free."

SOMEWHERE in Chile, four women are imprisoned for unspecified, possibly non-existent crimes.

In an atmosphere of suspicion and threatened torture, they try to come to terms with the nightmare of "disappearing" from society, of living out their own oblivion. As far as the rest of the world is concerned, they no longer exist.

Jorge Diaz's grim and fragmentary play, staged with uncompromising seriousness by the Monstrous Regiment Company, comes with an impressive factual back-up.

Row upon row of photographs show similar "lost" Latin Americans — possible subversives, possible anarchists, possible innocents.

So on a basic documentary level, the play,

YORKSHIRE STAR - 3-9 APRIL 1986

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REVIEWS

Worlds within

One of the most relentless horrors of finding yourself incarcerated for vague, or unstated reasons, in a camp for the "disappeared" must be fear of the unknown. The new



Yolanda Vazquez as Jimena.

Chilean play *My Song is Free* makes this fear a palpable presence within the theatre as it explores a dilemma many such prisoners must face — whether a little knowledge may prove to be the most dangerous thing, or whether it may save your life.

Despite their isolation within their cell, the four women prisoners do learn of the world outside. Jimena, who is pregnant, asserts that her unborn daughter understands the life happening around her. Similarly, the women know, though they cannot see, that the music is turned up loud to drown out screams, that the beating of tin plates on the bars is to protest against the shooting of prisoners and that a shirt left as a sign at the washing area augurs well. But they don't know when, or why, the guards will come from them. Like the child, the women feel comparatively safe

My Song is Free
by Jorge Diaz
toured by
Monstrous Regiment

within their confines: but when the door swings open, they are afraid.

Within the cell, relationships develop somewhat predictably: working class heroine Rosario is admired for here bravery and tenacity by timid rich woman, Jimena. An ambivalent message smuggled in alluding to an unnamed traitor sows mistrust, enmity and the concomitant stormy drama between Olga, a suspected informer, and Aurora, the activist actress. However, the solidarity between two women when one returns from being tortured is moving.

The ominous music, taped rattlings of keys and voice-over of indeterminate accent which heralded the opening of the prison door all served to detract from the acute anxiety of the women, but this is otherwise a thoughtful and potentially gripping play.

Sally Fenn

Amnesty April/May 1986 page 31

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