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## The Origin of Species

BIRMINGHAM REPERTORY  
STUDIO

Reviewer: David Ian Rabey

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By Bryony Lavery. Directed by Nona Sheppard.  
Designed by Jenny Carey. Lighting design by Michael  
Rowntree. First performance: 22 November 1984.  
Cast: Gillian Hanna, Mary McCusker.

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Archaeologist Molly – a woman whose 'career is in ruins' – goes on a dig in search of a man, but instead finds a four-million-year-old woman, whom she christens Victoria, then smuggles her neanderthal adoptee back home to the Yorkshire coast. This unusual version of mother-and-daughter relationships forms the premise

of Bryony Lavery's seasonal fantasy for the Monstrous Regiment company, hosted by Birmingham Rep, and the proceedings show more adventurousness and ease than most recent main house offerings at this theatre, despite the sadly meagre audience on the night I attended.

Nona Sheppard's deft, fluid direction helps play and players through some potentially problematic gear changes. Gillian Hanna gives a characteristically excellent performance as Molly, engaging the audience from the outset like a cheery Northern nanny (more benign than her counterpart in Angela Carter's *Company of Wolves*), describing rock formations with sculptures in chocolate cake and blithely informing us about classical anthropologists as comfortingly as Betty Turpin might proffer a pint of Newton &

Ridley's. Mary McCusker also deserves praise as the cavewoman progressing from simian grunts and shambles to childlike, slightly slavish speech and adult responsibility. Jenny Carey's set facilitates tonal changes, as its cosy Yorkshire hearth melts into desert sand and moonlit sea, the sounds of which provide pervasive atmospherics with a particular sense of elemental (and menstrual?) rhythms.

Victoria's first-hand accounts of stone-age life bring Molly to an awareness of how exceptional women, like herself, have been eclipsed or dismissed by specifically *male* anthropologists, whose values would also be appalled by Victoria's cannibalism; but his trait represents, for her, a form of regenerative communion redolent of Christ's. Molly similarly learns to accept Victoria as natural for-

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### PLAYS AND PLAYERS

January 1985

Issue Number 376

bear, for all the playful chaos which might be expected from introducing an animal force into an orderly household replete with knitting, classical music and volumes of Shakespeare. There is also a fine counterpoint between youth and age, the senses of time which make a New Year or birthday 'the death of a year' or, for Victoria, slow but telling progress to the birth of new knowledge. Some passages (such as Victoria's language acquisition) are uneconomic, but, like the evolutionary progress it begins by describing, the play prepares for a final spurt of acceleration as Victoria tests her new-found imagination. Her discovery of Molly's male-inflicted stigmata causes a real enough theatrical shudder, but nearly scuttles our previous sense of Molly as a character; in contrast, Victoria's response to the ultimate threat to her evolutions and species is touchingly necessary in its simple, practical resolve.

The symbolic resonances of *Origin* may sound portentous in summary, but its surface is distinguished by its simplicity and accessibility, along with notably enthusiastic performances. Here is a seasonal play without forced holiday-camp cheer; its comfort and joy are hard-won in the face of threats, but more valuable for that. Molly says fun is like fire, yielding warmth and sharp weapons, and the play succeeds best in the intimate glow of this sympathetic production; but she also reminds us that the principle of evolution is that the greater the knowledge, the greater chance of survival, and that, to quote her harmonium party piece, 'fundamental things apply, as time goes by'.

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SUNDAY 31 MARCH 1985

# Absolute twaddle

BRYONY LAVERY and William Douglas-Home, two practitioners who seem effortlessly to find new work coming out of their ears, both open plays in London that explore the mysterious recesses of history. Beyond this point, all similarity ceases. To witness their work in the same week is to marvel, if not at the richness, at least at the diversity to which the performing arts can aspire, if aspiration is quite the right word.

Douglas-Home's *After the Ball Was Over* (Old Vic) is set in the near future, but historical inasmuch as it plunders the barrel of clichés that constituted pre-1950 British drama. The subject is fox-hunting, which the dashed rotten House of Lords (Bolsheviks to a man) are voting to ban. What's more, a couple of hunt saboteurs have the bare-faced cheek to gatecrash the hunt ball! Luckily they're frightfully nice—come to think of it, she's a pretty little minx when she's angry, and he's a Tory, which just goes to show you can't judge a chap on one issue alone.

Nice is not a word you would

## ROS ASQUITH on London theatre

use for the Duke who plans to pursue the chase, even though his wife and best pal have just plunged to their deaths from his minstrel's gallery, which at least gives them a merciful respite from the subsequent action. What makes this experience verge on the tragic is the spectacle of the hapless performers (Anthony Quayle, Maxine Audley, Patrick Cargill) forced to thrash around in vain pursuit of such unspeakable twaddle simply to pay the gas bill. The fortitude of the actors, and that of the audience, at least half of whom were kind enough to engage in a wan flapping of hands at the end, are the only signs of virtue in the whole sorry business.

From a dodo to genuine pre-history, in Bryony Lavery's quirky *Origin of the Species*, presented by Monstrous Regiment at the Drill Hall. An ardent archaeologist digging for prehistoric man finds instead a four-million-year-old woman complete and ready to run. Molly, the

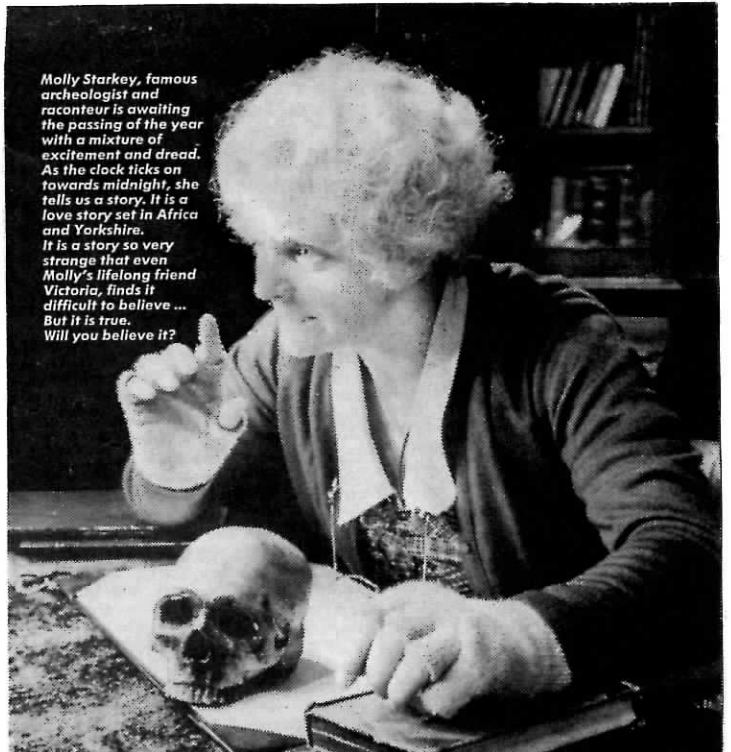
archaeologist, carts her back to Yorkshire, names her, rather against appearances, Victoria, and proceeds, on the premise that her brain, though old, is perfectly formed, to educate her like a daughter.

The spectacle of said fierce and hairy biped coming to terms with skirts and teapots and clocks and all civilisation's gentler aspects is crafted with great humour and charm. The crunch comes when the 'child' has to learn about cruelty and war, in a gentle but telling allegory of the loss of innocence.

Lavery's wit and imagination are unquestionably present, but her story, though immensely enjoyable, is marred by a lack of sophistication and grit—never really leaving the nursery, it always hovers on the edge of tweekness. None the less it has much of the fascination of good science fiction, the moral resonance of a parable, a beautiful set that combines domestic bliss with the call of the wild and confirms Jenny Carey as one of the most innovative designers around, and marvellously funny performances from Gillian Hanna (Molly) and Mary McCusker (Victoria).

# Time Out

**'Origin of the Species'** (Drill Hall)  
A warm, homely, fireside yarn infused with female solidarity but sadly lacking in ideas or technique. Bryony Lavery's 'love story' occurs on New Year's Eve in the form of a tale spun by ageing archaeologist Molly, who discovers ape-woman Victoria in darkest Africa, digs her up and brings her home to Yorkshire to teach her all about twentieth century existence. If Molly represents what has become of woman, Victoria symbolises hope for womankind and, as she steps alone into the night to greet the genocidal male race, it's a small hope indeed. Lavery's writing is simple and accessible but she doesn't develop themes and the one joke — teaching the ape-woman to speak — is stretched thin over two hours. The play, as it is written and in what it intends to convey, substantiates the idea of the passive female impetus. What it lacks is not so much a toughness as a sense of direction — there's nothing peculiarly male about that. (Suzie Mackenzie)



*Molly Starkey, famous archaeologist and raconteur is awaiting the passing of the year with a mixture of excitement and dread. As the clock ticks on towards midnight, she tells us a story. It is a love story set in Africa and Yorkshire. It is a story so very strange that even Molly's lifelong friend Victoria, finds it difficult to believe ... But it is true. Will you believe it?*

MONSTROUS REGIMENT PRESENTS  
**ORIGIN OF THE SPECIES**  
A LOVE STORY BY BRYONY LAVERY  
DIRECTED BY NONA SHEPPHARD DESIGNED BY JENNY CAREY  
WITH GILLIAN HANNA AND MARY McCUSKER  
TUES-SAT AT 8PM UNTIL APRIL 6  
**THE DRILL HALL ARTS CENTRE**  
16 Chenies Street London WC1 Box Office 01 637 8270

TIME OUT MARCH 28-3 APRIL 1985

**Is woman descended from the apes? Monstrous Regiment re-examine Darwinism in Bryony Lavery's ORIGIN OF THE SPECIES (Drill Hall) reviewed this week.**

29 MAR-4 APR 1985 C I T Y L I M I T S •



■ **'Origin of the Species'** by Bryony Lavery presented by Monstrous Regiment (Drill Hall)  
Meet Molly, a batty old archeological spinster in search of her origins. And Victoria, four million years old, her hungry hirsute ancestor. Bryony Lavery launches here on another of her fantastical tales, building an alternative mythology for women with humour and a deal of sarcasm. The trouble is, she tells stories rather than creating theatre, and it is left to the performers to pull together a three-dimensional element for their audience. But Mary McClusker and Gillian Hanna do a fine job. There is comical tension as Victoria is taught how to be a 'modern woman', triumph when she spits out her first word — 'apple' — and sadness when she leaves, as ultimately she must, to go out and take on the world. There are resonances here of Deborah Levy's fabulous 'Pax' with the same crucial vision of our planet's history, and of its horribly precarious future. (Barney Bardsley)

Drill Hall

DURRANT'S

11 Northburgh  
Street  
London EC1V 8JL  
01-251 4918

MORNING STAR

75 FARRINGDON ROAD  
LONDON EC1

ISSUE  
DATED 3 APR 1985

# Love story of humankind

Origin of the Species (Drill Hall, Chienis St., W1).

THIS is a love story of two women that encapsulates the history of humankind. We first meet mature Molly, white-haired and middle-class, reminiscing over tea, toast and a slice of layer cake.

She joins Louis and Mary Leakey in their excavations of prehistory but with a private objective — she wants a man.

And because she is good at finding things, she goes straight to where a four-million-year-old hominid lies buried in the sand. Only, it isn't a man, it's a woman.

She names her Victoria, after her grandmother, takes her back to Yorkshire and teaches her to speak, read and use her imagination.

In the process Molly learns too — that man didn't discover fire, woman did — and clothing and sharp tools as well.

The two women learn to love each other, and the climax comes when Victoria learns the last of her lessons — about the men who have discovered how to make everything disappear for ever. And nobody, Molly laments, can stop them.

"I will stop them," says Vic-

oria, puts on her warm Greenham-style woolly coat and fur-lined boots and marches out into mid-winter Yorkshire.

Monstrous Regiment in the persons of Mary McCusker (Molly) and Gillian Hanna (Victoria) perform Bryony Lavery's play with all the humour, pathos and exuberance of accomplished clowns. Nona Sheppard's direction is supple and beautifully paced, much helped by Jenny Carey's imaginative multiple set and Michael Rowntree's lambent lighting effects.

for both sexes. Don't miss it on

## Women flyers

Anywhere to Anywhere. (Albany Empire, Deptford).

THE Women's Theatre Group's production of Joyce Holliday's musical play commemorates the work of the women pilots of ATA (Air Transport Auxiliary) in WWII.

ATA's job was to ferry the warplanes from the factories where they were made or repaired to the RAF airfields whence they would fly on combat duties. It was set up in 1939 and consisted at first only of experienced, but over-age or unfit, male pilots. There were not enough of these as soon

became apparent.

There existed a small group of professional and amateur women fliers, nearly all from wealthy middle and upper-class backgrounds. Led by Pauline Gower,

## plays and players

by

Tom Vaughan

a professional stunt flier and daughter of an MP, they forced a reluctant Air Ministry to accept them alongside the men.

Three aspects receive the full treatment from a versatile cast — the comradeship and solidarity of the women in their piece of the war; their successful fight to be allowed to fly the RAF's most advanced warplanes, including the matchless Spitfire, Mosquito and Lancaster; and Pauline Gower and Amy Johnson's battle for equal pay.

After appearing in the East End Festival this week the show will tour Bristol, Lewes, Brighton and Swansea during April. Don't miss it.

Tom Vaughan

## Striptease living

Strippers (Theatre Royal, Plymouth).

THE idle cranes of the shipyards of Tyneside both literally and metaphorically frame Peter Terson's play.

Bernard Robson, has been made redundant from the yards and finding another job is not easy. His wife Wendy, a "week-end beauty Queen" when they first met, turns to the well paid growth industry of exotic dancing, better known as stripping.

The play focuses on the tensions between Wendy and Bernard which arise out of her new profession. "You're not a stripper, you're a woman," he shouts at her.

As Wendy learns the skills of her new profession Bernard learns the indignity of unemployment.

Just as Bernard's attitude to strippers is seen to be hypocritical, so are we, the audience, forced to question our responses as we sit and enjoy the strip within the respectable framework of a night at the theatre.

Anna Link



Gillian Hanna as Molly in *Origin of the Species* at the Drill Hall

## Before the Bomb

*Origin of the Species*, a Love Story

by Bryony Lavery, directed by Nona Sheppard  
at the Drill Hall, 16 Chancery Street, WC1 (627 8270)

Till 6th April

SET IN the last five minutes of New Year's Eve 1984, at home in famous old archaeologist Molly Starkey's Yorkshire sitting room, this play spans all of Time but is primarily a love story.

Molly (Gillian Hanna) describes her introduction to archaeology, her first "dig" in Tanganyka. True to everything she had studied, she was searching for Man. From her studies she knew how worthless Woman was. She wasn't at all prepared for her discovery of Victoria, a prehistoric woman (Mary McCusker, a spectacularly convincing early human), whom Molly miraculously resuscitated with a kiss.

Through her growing love for Victoria, Molly learns to love herself, whereas previously men

had taught her to despise herself. With that self-love comes a new awareness of the terrible sufferings and crimes men have inflicted on women, and Molly has to prepare Victoria for man's greatest crime of all against women, the complete annihilation of women he threatens with nuclear war.

This is an exceptionally imaginatively staged and performed play, both entertaining and moving and well worth seeing. Molly's discovery of Victoria is a memorably amusing piece of staging. Go and see it for yourself!

Sasha Braddell

# Origin of the Species

... at Birmingham Rep  
Studio

Sometimes you do tend to wonder if authors are losing their marbles. The search for novelty at any cost gives rise to some curious malformations

Bryony Lavery's latest farce is a complete confusion.

Miss Lavery belongs to that modern breed of

bellyaching feminist who protest the role of women in what is believed to be a male-dominated world. Which is nonsense. The plays are naturally propagandist material.

A cosy middle-aged Yorkshire biddy called Molly (Gillian Hanna) tells a story on New Year's Eve. In flash back she recounts experiences on an archaeological dig. In the process of digging in the sand she discovers a four million year old live woman who she drags back to Yorkshire and teaches to speak. (At this point my heart went out to these two excellent actresses battling with ludicrous material).

The creature is named Victoria (Mary McCusker uncomfortably draped with sandy bodyhair) and quickly learns the feminist angle as she ceases to squeak and grunt. By this time you do wonder why the author bothered.

In fact an engaging half hour or so while the plot flounders on can be spent looking for trace elements of *Company of Wolves* perhaps, or *An American Werewolf in London*.

My private award for the best production of the year still goes to the Belgrade Theatre, Coventry, for *Death of a Salesman*, where I suggest you go for some truly splendid theatre this weekend.

RICHARD EDMONDS