

# MONSTROUS REGIMENT

Nicholas de-Jongh

8 DEC 1976  
Vinegar Tom

THIS IS Caryl Churchill's new play about seventeenth century witches and written for the Monstrous regiment company.

With a lunchtime Gay sweatshop production it may well be the last play we shall see at this location.

This play, written from a feminist heart in a feminine body asks a pertinent question. Miss Churchill sets her work in a period when hangings of witches in England were at their greatest. She is less concerned with the reasons for this than the fact that almost all the witches were women. What undivine motive prompted this meticulous prosecution? Her answer is supplied by her description of a village community in which a widowed woman and her love-deserted daughter face the charges and accusations.

Although her characters speak in a tongue and idiom which has too little to do with Jacobean or Elizabethan England the detail and motivation is just right: the widow woman begging for a little yeast from her richer, but mean, cow-owning neighbour; the old woman's daughter lusted after by the neighbour's husband, a pregnant girl going for help to the local cunning woman (a kind of good witch). So once the cows begin to die, a kind of vengeful reermination leads to witchhunting.

Miss Churchill brings to effective dramatic life Keith Thomas's conclusion in Religion and the Decline of Magic that accusation of witchcraft were made against neighbours who ought to have been friends: the accusation was a symptom of the breakdown of community life and the loss of religious magic.

So with several beautifully authentic performances we are led to the dreadful blood letting finale and hangings, the torturings, and the wild charges against women not bad, but oppressed economically and sexually: for that is Miss Churchill's answer. Women (though most of the witches were old and solitary) were convenient scapegoats, they were in the firing line of history and convention. So are they now—says the modern music and songs, supplied as a grossly vulgar and mistaken commentary to the intelligent and interesting script. But Pam Brighton's languid direction sacrifices speed and furious passion for a dejected or glum naturalism.

THE  
GUARDIAN  
8-12-76

## West Midlands 'Vinegar Tom'

MONSTROUS Regiment, the theatre company formed last year to give women better opportunities in the theatre, are currently touring their new work, "Vinegar Tom", in the West Midlands under the sponsorship of West Midlands Arts. Written by Caryl Churchill, "Vinegar Tom" explores one of the darkest areas of female oppression, namely the searching out of witches, which reached epidemic proportions in the late 16th and 17th centuries, as the Church was riven by conflicting religious philosophies.

Miss Churchill has produced a script which has obviously been deeply researched yet she manages to present her material in an intensely dramatic form, an intensity which is echoed in the acting of everyone of the nine members of the cast.

With only the simplest of sets they bring vividly to life the squalor, superstition and fear which permeated so much of rural life in this period. The grim struggle of peasant families, scratching a living in the teeth of fickle Nature, their need to find a scapegoat for the natural disasters which beset them, the gnawing guilt complexes which Puritanism was adding to their burdens, these were the factors which produced a situation in which women, particularly women alone, were hounded simply because they were such vulnerable prey. This was the meat of the play and it proved a

powerful and often distressing dish to stomach.

The Company's attempt to link, through a number of songs, this historical situation to parallels in modern society was less successful. It rather diminished the dramatic tension of the play with lyrics that were often too blatant in their feminist message. The final presentation of Kramer and Sprenger, the notorious witch inquisitors, as a vaudeville act, "backing by the entire Company", was an anti-climax to the tragic ending of the drama and the haunting song, "Gentle Witches", which I feel should have closed the evening. However, the main play is very good theatre indeed.

A.F.

THE  
STAGE  
11-11-76

Monstrous Regiment Limited

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Charity number 274517

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

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

**CARYL CHURCHILL'S Vinegar Tom** (Monstrous Regiment, at the ICA and on tour) may be set in the world of seventeenth-century rural witchcraft, but it speaks, through its striking images and its plethora of ironic contradictions, of and to this century's still deep-rooted anti-feminism and women's repression.

It is a play about sexual politics. Churchill's witches are shown to have been the scapegoats of poverty and pseudo-religious persecution, superstition and fear — hanged because of their sexuality and their place in the economic pecking order. The modern parallels in the play are implicit (except in the songs which intersperse the scenes) and extremely powerful.

Take the case of Alice Noakes and her mother — poor enough to starve, not quite poor enough to be stigmatised by being on the parish's social security.

They squat in a hovel and beg, borrow and steal to survive. Alice steals a night of "love" in a damp ditch with a dark stranger who teases her he is the devil. "Take me away," she pleads. "Take a whore?" he says. "I'm not a then?" he says. "You're not a wife, nor a widow, nor a virgin."

In today's welfare jargon she'd be on the files as an unmarried mother or a single-parent family, and still be as statusless as a woman and a person as poor Alice. Plus ça change...

Mother Noakes tries to borrow a bit of yeast from her ladder-

climbing neighbour, Margery, a woman so sexually frigid and self-righteous that the butter she churns and which won't "come" (sexual imagery pervades the play) wouldn't melt in her mouth. Margery refuses. Mother Noakes curses: "You've got a fine man, a field, five cows — what more could a woman want? Devil take you." "Devil take you" is a refrain running throughout the play, at first an innocent "sod you" manner of speaking, eventually the evidence which hangs the speakers.

Take the case of Susan — young, married, with one toddler, one child on the breast and another on the way, in as long a time as it takes to conceive, gestate and give birth to three. She doesn't want it, but she doesn't want to be rid of it. Oh, don't we know the feeling! She opts, reluctantly, for a back-street abortion which leaves her physically sick and mentally deranged with guilt. So the coincidental death of her older child is taken as God's punishment for her sin, just as the "curse" of menstruation and the pain of childbirth are taken as his punishment for the sin of being born a woman.

Take the case of Miss Betty, daughter of the manor, about to be married off to a man of her father's choosing. For refusing, she is locked up, bled with leeches and about to be charged with witchcraft for her independent stance. It's a beautifully ironic double-bind dilemma. If she refuses to marry for her father's convenience, she'll be hanged for a witch; if she marries, she'll be an "all right" wife instead of a witch. (Remember poor statusless Alice?)

Take the case of Jack, Margery's husband, besotted with an unrequited passion for Alice, so much that he can't make it with Margery. In the hysteria of the witch hunts he concludes that Alice has bewitched his private parts, literally removed his prick and put it in a box with the others she feeds on oats and hay. The scene in which Alice gives "it" back by arousing him is yet another of excruciating irony. But, for refusing the amorous advances of a man she doesn't fancy, Alice is charged with witchcraft.

Take the case of the "cunning woman" whose herbal home

pharmacy is as busy as a GP's surgery. All the characters consult her — Alice for a love potion and contraception, Susan for the abortion, Miss Betty for youth counselling, Jack for impotency, Margery for sexual frustration. She is hanged for providing a community health service.

Take the case of Mr. Packer — witch-hunter extraordinary, who in the name of God prods women's private parts with sharp metal in search of the devil's mark. What would we call him today? NHS consultant? Sadistic pornographer? Or take his "Goody" helper who assists in the obstetrical torture because the wages are good.

At one point the cunning woman explains the art of sinking without drowning (yet another irony, of course). What the play did, implicitly, was show how sinking without drowning is the art of survival as a woman, whether in the seventeenth or twentieth century.

Monstrous Regiment, a co-operative company who came together out of dissatisfaction with the opportunities offered to women working in the theatre, performed this beautiful play beautifully.

← CATHERINE ITZIN . TRIBUNE . DEC.

## VINEGAR TOM

THE TIMES . 8.12.76

### Vinegar Tom ICA

#### Ned Chaillet

Even in horror films witch-hunts usually have, ambiguously or blatantly, a sexual element. Caryl Churchill is generous in her feminist play about witches, *Vinegar Tom*, in suggesting that it was not necessarily conscious sexuality that turned men against the women who were usually the victims of witch hysteria. But she is clear in her depiction of women as the victims of sexual and social oppression, while suggesting that the oppressors might also be victims.

From the casual copulation of a country girl in a ditch with a passing man who claims to be the devil, Miss Churchill builds up a panorama of English life during the great witch-hunts. She presents a picture slightly different from the one handed down through legend and historical records.

Many of her women live in a society separate from men, basically powerless but perhaps threatening: a widow scraping by in a collapsing cottage, her

daughter unmarriedable with an illegitimate son; an old woman herbalist with potions for love, sleep, pregnancy and abortion. But the women with men are not better off, bearing children beyond endurance, living unloved with a husband or being married off to men they abhor.

Miss Churchill paints a bleak picture, relieved infrequently by humour, directed with cold precision by Pam Brighton and played with an element of grandeur by the new theatre company Monstrous Regiment.

The women and men of the company, whether enacting the historically based events which lead to accusations of witchcraft, to torture and hanging, or singing the pointed, militantly feminist songs which tie the action to the present, have found a style which demands serious attention.

Their final song, "We Are the Witches Now", does not speak confidently of the present, but when the bright lights come up at long last, and the company comes together in powerful chorus, everything that has gone before sounds like a manifesto.

# MONSTROUS REGIMENT



## VINEGAR TOM

by Caryl Churchill

Monstrous Regiment, the feminist theatre group formed last year, is touring for the next few months with a reworked version of their first play, *Scum*, by C.G. Bond and Claire Luckham. They will also be performing a new play, *Vinegar Tom*, by Caryl Churchill, directed by Pam Brighton.

The new play is set in the middle of the seventeenth century, somewhere in the rural north of England, and, like *Scum*, looks at the history of the people from the women's point of view. *Vinegar Tom* is the cat who belongs to Alice and her mother, women with neither husbands or property, semi-outcasts in a society which defines women's status in terms of their possession of such advantages. In addition Alice likes sex — and is used by the men, but also feared and despised for such non-conformism. The play carefully and evocatively unfolds the complex process whereby women such as Alice and her mother are 'made' into witches by the ignorance, superstitious and religious fears, and sexual hypocrisy of those around them. They become scapegoats for insufficiently understood events — illness, sexuality, pregnancy and abortion. Other women

are sucked into the whirlpool of witch-hunting and witch-pricking — one of those horrific tests made on women to see if they were witches or not, in which innocence could never win.

The play builds up a frightening process of simple brutality, through which various women — Alice, a middle class girl whose parents force her into marriage, the cunning herbalist woman, a simple minded friend — all struggle to get some grasp on their lives as women. They fail because the conditions under which they live are against them — and in part their own limited knowledge and understanding itself contributes to their bewildering persecution. Because the web of ignorance, prejudice and superstition is so carefully woven, it is not in any way a defeatist or pessimistic play, but one which clarifies and exposes many ideas and beliefs which no longer hold such strong sway today — such as the easy way in which the cat, Tom, comes to be seen as the devil's 'familiar', as soon as Alice and her mother are branded as witches.

The play is punctuated by songs which function as a related but detached commentary on the action.

To my mind some of the songs are problematic — the only criticism I have of the play. There is no hard and fast rule about how music should be used in the theatre, and one of the most exciting features of a great deal of fringe/political theatre is the presence of music and song alongside dialogue and action. But whether the music adds another dimension, or whether it appears to be an arbitrary addition, depends on the nature of its structural relationship to what is going on in the body of the play. Here the songs are sung very explicitly as commentary — not by 'characters', but by different members of the cast at different times. The music is modern and melodic — no apparent links with seventeenth century music. This in itself works as an effective contrast; a theatrical device which provides variety. But some of the words are sung to us as a straight gloss on the condition of women in the twentieth century, set side by side with the seventeenth century representations we see in the play. They imply a simplistic one-to-one correspondence between the condition of seventeenth-century women and women

today which, ironically, is the very opposite of the play's actual achievement — to unfold and explore conditions of life which are very different from our own.

Of course there are important parallels between sexist ideology then and now, but exactly what these are and how we can learn from them are questions already raised by the play implicitly; one song tells us how the family props up the state — implying that it does so now in the same way it did then. When the words are a direct commentary on the action, isolating one element in a scene and heightening and concentrating it (for example, one song with a simple drum accompaniment), the effect is superb. When both music and words are utterly twentieth-century, the shock of dislocation, meant to make the audience *think* about what we are seeing, is in danger of momentarily alienating us completely.

I have spent some time on the few jarring moments precisely because the rest of the play and performances are so good, and because the integration of different art forms in one production are difficult and perhaps need more analysis than a straightforward either/or play/musical. *Vinegar Tom* is both an impressive feminist play, and an impressive feminist theatre production.

Micheline Wandor

## Scum

York Arts Centre, November 18-20;  
Matlock College, Derbyshire, November 29-30;  
Warwick University Art Centre, December 1-4.

## Vinegar Tom

Aldershot West End Centre, November 22;  
Portsmouth College of Art, November 23;  
Salisbury, St. Edmunds College of Art, November 24;  
Southampton, Itchen College, November 25;  
Basingstoke Drama Centre, November 26;  
Winchester Tower Centre, November 27;  
London, ICA, Pall Mall, December 6-18;  
For further information contact *Monstrous Regiment*, 59 Camden Square, London NW1.

# MONSTROUS REGIMENT

Humberside Theatre:  
Monstrous Regiment in  
"Vinegar Tom"  
(Caryl Churchill)

"VINEGAR TOM" is about witches. But its thesis is more general, and Caryl Churchill, who is one of Britain's most promising young playwrights, is looking at witch-hunting as a symbol of Fascist intolerance everywhere and in every age.

Shades of Arthur Miller's "The Crucible", perhaps. Except that Miss Churchill is not talking about a specific era, as Miller did about McCarthyism in post-war America.

She sees in the burning of witches the same social phenomenon that reared its ugly head in the persecution and exploitation of Jews, blacks, and, she extrapolates, women.

Set in 17th-century England, the play examines a group of women dealing with the problems which beset their sex in all ages: the problems of widowhood, the unwanted child, the claustrophobia of marriage, the unmarried mother, and spinsterhood.

Witches were, apparently, mainly single young women or menopausal old widows — labelling them witches was the 17th-century's way of dealing with social problems and eccentrics.

Thematically, this is a bit chaotic, but Miss Churchill gives it dramatic coherence by shaping the various episodes so that they lead up to the drama of a witch-finder's court.

She comments upon the action by setting at the side songs which, though they occasionally have the naivety and smugness of hindsight, point up the contemporary relevance of the event.

Monstrous Regiment is a new group of considerable ability dedicated to producing women's theatre. But, although the purpose of the play and of the company is didactic, the quality of Miss Churchill's writing and the remarkable versatility of a set of very good actors and musicians ensure that the total effect is both moving and thought-provoking rather than hectoring.

The songs are memorable, and much more disciplined than those in their last production "Scum", which was seen in Sheffield some months ago. And director Pam Brighton has ensured that they do not upset the pace or rhythm of the play which she handles with sensitivity.

The show is to tour and will be seen in Goole and York.

YORKSHIRE  
POST.

## Terrifying Tom

WHERE are today's witches, and who are they? — we were asked at the end of Monstrous Regiment's "Vinegar Tom" last night.

They are, we must presume, those women who now challenge the traditional concepts of womanhood and female subser-vience.

After all, that is essentially what the witches of old were up to. If they existed at all, that is.

The point of "Vinegar Tom" was to show how society based its fears on rationalisation — while blemishes on the skin were a sure sign of being a witch, no blemishes was not a sign of innocence, for example.

Every misfortune was blamed on "that woman in the cottage," and circumstantial evidence became absolute proof of witchery.

Part of a West Midlands

Arts tour, season, Monstrous Regiment at Bromsgrove provided excellently thoughtful, and at times terrifying, drama, under the direction of Pam Brighton.

Songs by Caryl Churchill and Helen Galvin were beautiful, though the final cast-chant reduced the play's effect somewhat.

DAVID FORD

WORCESTER  
EVENING  
NEWS.

3 NOV. 1976

THE MORNING STAR

### THEATRE

Vinegar Tom (Humberside Theatre, Hull).

THE Monstrous Regiment are a new theatre company made up of actors, musicians, writers and directors, and their principal reason for coming together is a dissatisfaction with the opportunities offered women working in the theatre.

Last week the company were performing "Vinegar Tom," by Caryl Churchill, at Hull, and the audience reaction on the opening night was a complete

justification of their efforts to promote their ideals.

The play is set in the early 17th century and is concerned with the social causes of witch-hunts — fear, deprivation, tension between neighbours, the need for scapegoats and the traditional male view of female sexuality as evil.

It is difficult to pick out individuals, as the group interacts perfectly and produces an uncompromising but sensitive performance of the highest order.

The music entertains but still manages to keep the mood flowing. Monstrous Regiment have added a new dimension to the world of the theatre.

Dave Marson

MORNING STAR

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# MONSTROUS REGIMENT

## Women in a different light

Monstrous Regiment is a new touring theatre company which began work earlier this year. It was founded specifically to give women better opportunities in the theatre and to present work which shows women in a different light from traditional theatrical roles. The company gave one performance of their new play, "Vinegar Tom", at North Worcestershire College, Bromsgrove this week as part of the West Midlands Drama Touring Scheme.

Written by Caryl Churchill, "Vinegar Tom" highlights one of the darkest corners of female oppression, namely the searching out of witches which reached epidemic proportions in the late 16th and early 17th centuries, as the Church was riven by conflicting religious philoso-

phies.

Caryl Churchill has produced a script which has clearly been thoroughly researched yet she presents her material in an intensely dramatic form, an intensity which is matched by the acting of every one of the nine members of the cast.

Against the simplest of sets they bring vividly to life the squalor, superstition and fear which permeated so much of rural life in this period. The grim struggle against poverty of the peasant families scratching a living from a fickle Nature, their need to find scapegoats for the natural disasters which beset them, the gnawing guilt complexes which Puritanism was adding to their burdens, these were the factors which produced a situation in which women, particularly women alone,

were hounded because they were such vulnerable prey. This was the meat of the play and it was a powerful and often distressing dish to stomach.

However the company's attempt to link, by a number of songs, this historical situation to parallels in modern society was less successful. It rather diminished the dramatic tension of the play with lyrics which were often too strident in their feminist message. The final presentation of Kramer and Sprenger, the notorious witch inquisitors, as a Vaudeville act, with backing from the company, was an anti-climax to the tragic end of the drama and the haunting song, "Gentle Witches", which I felt should have closed the performance.

ANN FITZGERALD

BIRMINGHAM MAIL ? POST ?

### THE STAGE

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### West Midlands

### 'Vinegar Tom'

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A.F.

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# MONSTROUS REGIMENT

## Humiliation on road to the gallows

By ROBERT ORCHARD

"VINEGAR TOM," at Chapter Arts Centre, Cardiff, until Saturday, is a play about witches that falls uneasily between two toad-stools.

In this work by Caryl Churchill loosely-connected scenes glimpse the domestic routine of rural Jacobian England, which is rudely disrupted by suspicions of witchery in its midst.

In a British version of *The Crucible* we watched the inexorable trial of the innocents and winced with them at the humiliations endured on the road to the gallows.

The female-dominated *Monstrous Regiment* present the show and there is an attempt to provide some of the viewpoints they have put so forcefully elsewhere.

So far, so good. I'm as much a feminist as the next man, but the effort to draw parallels in this play with women in modern society are too superficial to merit much attention. We are left with neither a single-minded portrait of witch-hunting nor an economic sketch to be usefully compared and contrasted to highlight another time.

The dual standard of morality of days past is eloquently captured in the play's opening moments. A poor country wench is dismissed as a whore by a briefly encountered lover as he moves on to pastures new, as rakes tend to do. And swiftly following this a noble lady is locked up for refusing to marry whom she is bid. Both are humiliated.

### MOTIF

Yet what relevance has this for us? What if women were considered easier game for the Devil to make witches of? If the play is saying that man's deep-seated prejudices against the fair sex remain today, only in subtler form, it is saying so very quietly.

The Evil Woman imagined by men is a dominant motif, but little is added to the idea in a modern context, save a vague plea for women to ask themselves how men are stopping them now they no longer burn those women who have any spirit. Perhaps that is sufficiently thought-provoking.

Can such deep-seated hatred really have disappeared? This was a compelling show for the most part, at times harrowing, with some fine playing of what were usually two-dimensional characters.

The songs fitted in well and were beautifully rendered, while the straw-strewn set was economic yet flexible enough to convey the numerous locations with a few well-chosen props and sensitive lighting.

I would have preferred less of the medium and more of the message, but there is still plenty to think about here.

## Witchcraft under the spotlight in 'Vinegar Tom'

OCCASIONALLY, the more lurid of our Sunday newspapers will unearth a coven of witches.

There will be a titillatingly blurred picture of several naked forms and a suggestive account of what generally happens at such gatherings.

Most readers are no more shocked or frightened by these stories than they would be if all the lights in the house suddenly went out. What, not another power cut!

But a few centuries ago, the concept of witchcraft provoked very real fear and folk lore was full of tales based upon superstition and ignorance.

Very few men were singled out as servants of the Devil; the role was most often cast upon women. Why was that?

"Vinegar Tom," a musical play which opened at the Humberside Theatre last night, suggests that the likeliest reason was to do with female sexuality.

The production is by the *Monstrous Regiment Theatre Company*, formed last year by a group of actresses who were dissatisfied with the kind of parts mostly written for women. They commissioned this play from Caryl Churchill.

"Vinegar Tom" is set in the 17th century and presents a picture of simple, hard-working rural life, but one far from idyllic.

In those days there were no scientific explanations why milk failed to churn into butter, why cows died and why people were suddenly attacked by strange pains.

The play makes it clear how easy it was for the community to pick on an old woman or perhaps her unchaste daughter



THEATRE

as the root of their trouble.

Interspersed by arresting contemporary songs, a series of short scenes move from the old widow's hovel to the dairy of a neighbouring farmhouse and into the hut of an elderly crone attributed with magical powers of healing (health and herbs may go hand-in-hand today, but in the 17th century the Devil was in a potion).

It is when the action shifts to the room of the trial, where the witch-hunter carries out his inhumane practices with a needle, and into the prison, that the play moves one to compassion and anger on behalf of these victims who just happened to be old, lonely or ignorant women.

There were excellent characterisations by the cast (unidentified by part in the programme), while costumes and lighting gave the effect of a brown, rustic hue over most of the activities, except at the trial which was harshly lit.

A powerful production. — PRU CLARK.

HULL  
DAILY  
MAIL

13.10.76.

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# MONSTROUS REGIMENT

## WOMEN STATE THEIR CASE

By Frank Kempe

"Vinegar Tom," Monstrous  
Regiment.

**M**ONSTROUS Regiment are a group evidently dedicated to the deliverance of the theatre from domination by male chauvinistic pigs.

They build their repertoire specifically to include plays which create a maximum of job opportunities for females.

One of these is Caryl Churchill's "Vinegar Tom," which they performed at the Plough on Wednesday. It has a cast of nine women and two men.

It also contains some potent propaganda for the cause of what is still euphemistically termed the weaker sex by showing how suspected witches were treated under English law four centuries ago.

I found it a disturbing and often distasteful recap of history, not so much because the alleged sorceresses were frequently tortured and almost invariably hanged as on account of the procedures of body-searching undertaken to discover evidence of Devil's marks.

### Will of God

Such intimate examination would be tolerated today only if practised on feminine competitors in the Olympic Games. During the 1600s, it was all done in the name of the Church, which also deplored the relief of pain in childbirth as a flouting of the will of God.

In presentation and characterisation, Pam Brighton's production was real enough to make anyone feel uneasy. The closing stages of the play were presented under the shadow of a gallows, on which two hags were eventually despatched.

It was illuminating also to be reminded of the kind of female behaviour which gave cause for a charge of witchcraft during early Stuart times: those who were "boastful, miserable, lustful, melancholy, or leading a lewd and naughty kind of life" were particularly suspect, as were those of "develishe tongue" or "troublesome among their neighbours." Indeed, it is difficult to imagine how any woman could possibly have hoped to escape.

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Charity number 274517

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# MONSTROUS REGIMENT

THE FINANCIAL TIMES

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## Theatres this week

**ALDWYCH**—Wild Oats. Hilarious farce by John O'Keefe dating from 1791. It uses all the conventional tricks of farce, mocks them slightly, and adds an extra item in the shape of a stage-struck hero. (Alan Howard.) Not to be missed.

**ORTENION**—Cold Blood. The performance of Tom Stoppard's *Dirty Linen* at the Arts Theatre at 11.45 p.m., in aid of UNICOF. The theatre bar will be open until the curtain rises.

**ICA THEATRE**—Vinegar Tom. Monstrous Regiment in Caryl Churchill's fascinating but slightly underwritten play about witch hunting in the 17th century. Reviewed Wednesday.

**PLAYERS THEATRES**—Babes in the Wood. The genuine Vic-torian burlesque article performed by a company who know exactly how it should be done. Opened Wednesday.

On Monday, December 20 there will be a special late performance of Tom Stoppard's *Dirty Linen* at the Arts Theatre at 11.45 p.m., in aid of UNICOF. The theatre bar will be open until the curtain rises.

Tickets are £2.30 (30 standing at £1). They can be obtained from Edward de Souza at the

company. Opened Wednesday.

The genuine Vic-torian burlesque article performed by a company who know exactly how it should be done. Opened Wednesday.

The Financial Times Wednesday December 15 1976

ICA Theatre

## Vinegar Tom

With this invaluable venue's expiry date now set for Christmas Eve and a lively campaign under way to try and save it (the ICA is in a "deficit situation" of £24,000, closing the theatre might save £3,000), the feminist group Monstrous Regiment give further evidence of Caryl Churchill's threat to emerge as a really fascinating dramatist. In truth, the best parts of *Vinegar Tom* are those that concentrate on the economic narrative line of a witch-hunt in a 17th century village.

Gillian Hanna plays Alice, a girl we first see enjoying sex with a man of the world before being abandoned by him and left to share her mother's bed, with a child in the corner. She encourages her friend to go through with an abortion and then resists the advances of a brawny farmer. He accuses her of destroying his manhood; and it is not long before the witch-hunt chases her into the open and presses the failure of a peasant society to care for its own on a trumped-up charge of black magic.

But the play falters in its lack of faith in dramatic analogy, let alone the power of the story as it stands. The music (lyrics by Churchill, music by Helen Glavin), admittedly entertaining in itself, spells out the fact that we all need to find something to burn: if not a witch, then perhaps a woman, a black or a Jew. Such sentiment, although arguably admirable, is hardly achieved in the play itself. Or rather, is potentially achieved and then tossed away in righteous overstatement.

The witch-hunter's assistant, a chirpy girl with a speech about keeping herself healthy while keeping the country healthy, is an interesting character idea that remains just that. But it is the play's earlier scenes which stick in the memory: an old woman begging for yeast while the farmer's wife churns the butter; a white-faced girl wrapped up in a strait-jacket with some medical hogwash about hysteria coming on with the monthly period. Good work by Mary McCusker and Helen Glavin. Pam Brighton directs the strongest parts of the play with generous sensitivity.

MICHAEL COVENEY

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# Witchcraft under the spotlight in 'Vinegar Tom'

OCCASIONALLY, the more lurid of our Sunday newspapers will unearth a coven of witches.



**THEATRE**

There will be a titillatingly blurred picture of several naked forms and a suggestive account of what generally happens at such gatherings.

Most readers are no more shocked or frightened by these stories than they would be if all the lights in the house suddenly went out. What, not another power cut!

But a few centuries ago, the concept of witchcraft provoked very real fear and folk lore was full of tales based upon superstition and ignorance.

Very few men were singled out as servants of the Devil; the role was most often cast upon women. Why was that? "Vinegar Tom," a musical play which opened at the Hammerside Theatre last night, suggests that the likeliest reason was to do with female sexuality.

The production is by the Monstrous Regiment Theatre Company, formed last year by a group of actresses who were dissatisfied with the kind of parts mostly written for women. They commissioned this play from Caryl Churchill.

"Vinegar Tom" is set in the 17th century and presents a picture of simple, hard-working rural life, but one far from idyllic.

In those days there were no scientific explanations why milk failed to churn into butter, why cows died, and why people were suddenly attacked by strange pains.

The play makes it clear how easy it was for the community to pick off an old woman or perhaps her unchaste daughter

as the root of their trouble.

Interspersed by arresting contemporary songs, a series of short scenes move from the old widow's novel to the dairy of a neighbouring farmhouse and into the hut of an elderly crone attributed with magical powers of healing (health and herbs may go hand-in-hand today, but in the 17th century the Devil was in a potion).

It is when the action shifts to the room of the trial, where the witch-hunter carries out his inhumane practices with a needle, and into the prison that the play moves on to compassion and anger on behalf of these victims who just happened to be old, lonely or ignorant women.

There were excellent characterisations by the cast (unidentified by part in the programme), while costumes and lighting gave the effect of a brown, rustic hue over most of the activities, except at the trial which was harshly lit.

A powerful production.  
**FRU QUARK.**

HULL DAILY MAIL

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