

BRIGHTON

EVENING ARGUS, Friday, December 16, 1983—7

Gal who drove Hickock wild

by Robert Shelton

CALAMITY seems a dangerous title for a play. But this story of the folk heroine of the West, Calamity Jane, staged at the Pavilion Theatre, New Road, Brighton, was a far better production than the title suggests.

In fact, this stands out as one of the freshest and cleverest pieces of feminist theatre I've seen. Rivalled only, perhaps, by Shakespeare's *Sister*, put on about a year ago here by the same London-based troupe, *Monstrous Regiment*.

Calamity Jane was a true product of the Old West, able to hold her own with all the rough elements of mankind and environment. Yet, as this

play reveals, she was also very much a woman.

By Wild Bill Hickock, Calamity had a daughter, who she sent back East. Calamity went blind in old age, but still had the yen for the open range, the gold strike, the piece of action.

Two other frontier types have been invented here by playwright Bryony Lavery. *Madame Moustache* (Mary McCusker) is a music-hall type, a jaded sophisticate. *Quiet Kate* (Jane Cox) is the domesticated, hard-working, self-denying "traditional" woman.

Sitting on their ingeniously devised covered wagons, the three present us with a mini-epic of the life of the Old West, and what was expected of women, and what they did.

MONSTROUS REGIMENT

Fresh light on Jane

CALAMITY — Arts Centre,
Warwick University, until
Saturday.

HISTORY hasn't been kind to Calamity Jane. At first it painted her black — and then transformed her into the saccharine image of Doris Day.

Playwright Bryony Lavery is conscious of her heroine's distortion at the hands of the history books.

But *Calamity* isn't a simple search for the real Calamity Jane. What she is seeking is the essence of the woman who took her place among the pioneers of the Wild West.

This finely-crafted play, performed by Monstrous Regiment, tells the story of a trek by three remarkable women — Calamity, Madame Moustache (a murderous card-sharp) and Quiet Kate, steadily determined to buy her own farm.

Through a rich interweaving of dialogue and song, it explores their hopes and fears, their place in society and their needs for independence and friendship.

Calamity is a fascinating and original work. Its language at times plumbs deeply-felt and deeply moving poetic veins. Yet it is rarely overstated.

And it is full of verve, humour and wit. The acting from Jane Cox, Gillian Hanna and Mary McCusker is superb, generating a real empathy with each other and the audience.

The simple yet stylish staging, based around three wagons and clever use of light and sound, is excitingly theatrical.

Sarah Crompton

As good as it sounds!

CALAMITY, by Bryony Lavery, presented by Monstrous Regiment — there is a glorious-sounding collection of words for you, and the show they make up is just as good.

It is undoubtedly the best evening's entertainment so far this season at Scunthorpe Civic, and such is the contrary nature of life that one of the smallest audiences yet saw it.

The sad thing is that there are just a few hours left to remedy the deficiency, for this is only a two-night stand. For a chance to see *Calamity*, it is definitely worth dropping any flexible plans you had in mind for this evening.

Monstrous Regiment is either the third or fourth women's drama group whose work I have seen, and it is the liveliest and most talented.

Calamity is a pastiche of fact about frontier life in America in the late 19th century and it is presented in music as well as drama. Jane Cox, one of the three players, composed the music, and very pleasing it is, too.

Jane plays the part of quiet Kate, considered by

the other two at first to behave like the Pope.

Gillian Hanna is Calamity Jane, who maybe partly accounts for the success of the production by persuading the playgoer to forget for considerable periods that this is in fact an all-women show.

Mary McCusker is Madame Moustache, Queen of the Cardtable, and handy with quite a few tricks. These, and a rope spinning act, are admirably done.

Producer Nona Sheppard has achieved an altogether first-rate show, very much helped by the set, the main items of which are three convincing Western wagons.

Helped by remarkable sound effects from the players, those wagons really seem to move, and — with the aid of clever lighting effects — truly rest for the night.

Normally, an all-women play has a feminist message, but the point this piece seems to make most clearly is that you are more likely to live happily and die in your own bed if you take to farming rather than running a gambling house or living a wild cowboy's life.

That is surely not a message particularly to women. Maybe it is because it is not stridently feminist that this performance is so delightful.

— A. R.

Monstrous Regiment Limited
4 Elder Street London E1 6BT
Telephone: 01-247 2398
Registered in England number 1332483
Registered Office: 49 South Molton Street London W1Y 1HE
Charity number 274517
Directors: Ms C Bowler, Ms J Cupido, Mr G Garside
Ms G L Hanna, Ms M McCusker, Mr J Slade

MONSTROUS REGIMENT

Monstrous Regiment

... at the University of Warwick
Arts Centre

Calling a play *Calamity* could be asking for trouble. But it would be unfair to imply that Bryony Lavery's intriguing piece for Monstrous Regiment was deserving of its title.

Superb performances by the versatile cast of three make this a work well worth watching. Any weakness lies in the conception of the script itself, and in the sometimes lugubrious pacing.

When you have just three actresses making the most of the music, sound effects and moving their own props about, there are inevitably some undramatic pauses. Lively banjo music cannot disguise lack of action.

Madame Moustache, played with spine-chilling suggestiveness by Mary McCusker, Quiet Kate, a very human portrayal by Jane Cox, and Calamity Jane, a performance of stature and sensitivity by Gillian Hanna, make an unlikely trio travelling West on a wagon train.

But three brilliantly-etched cameos do not add up to a coherent whole. I kept waiting for the cavalry to come to the rescue — disappointed that other characters never materialised. Calamity Jane becomes merely one of three oddballs, rather than the sensation she would have been when set against conventional society of the time. Madame Moustache seems unnecessarily sinister: if the object is to show three types of frontierwomen who helped to win the West, why make her a gory multiple murderer instead of just a prostitute with a heart of gold — and gold-digging propensities?

Still, the jokes — often crude and usually feminist — are rip-snortingly funny, the music excellent, lyrics witty and comic touches hilarious at times.

VICTORIA McKEE

Birmingham Post
Thurs 20 Oct '83

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Tricycle Theatre

R&C

ROMEIKE & CURTICE

THE PRESS CLIPPING BUREAU Tel: 01-882 0155

Kilburn Times

Planner No. 72A-385

Weekly

3 FEB 1984

Humdinger of a show at Tricycle

"Go west, young man", was the old-timer's advice. Well, the Tricycle Theatre at Kilburn did, and they certainly struck gold. Their new production "Calamity", which runs until February 11, is a side-slap-pin, tear-jerkin' humdinger of a show.

"Calamity" tells the tale of the well-known Jane of that name and two friends who set off to cross the prairies and bad lands in the last days of the Wild West to join a travelling show.

"Monstrous Regiment", the all-female company who wrote and produced "Calamity", make the most of the historical setting of their play. There's quite a deal of waggon-shaking, rope-twirling and fancy shooting. Not to mention campfire songs from Quiet Kate and plum devilish card-tricks by that mysterious Madame Moustache.

Then there's Calamity Jane her-

self, with her take-it-or-leave-it manners and backroom bar stories of the old days. The acting by Mary McCusker as Moustache, Gillian Hanna, as Calamity, and Jane Cox, as Kate, is uniformly excellent in their three very different ways. Each character in this odd trio is presented with vitality, confidence and wit.

My only quibble with the players is that they didn't seem to pause long enough between scenes for the audience, admittedly hesitant that night, to begin clapping. But the other side of this was a tight-paced production, free of indulgent interruptions.

A first-rate script by Bryony Lavery is the bedrock of this excellent tale of women without men, which is also free of even a hint of the ill-will that might suggest. Like all the best comedies, "Calamity" alternates between the hilarious and the sad, the commonplace and the mystical, and back again.

Ian Cowie

TRICYCLE THEATRE

R&C

ROMEIKE & CURTICE

THE PRESS CLIPPING BUREAU Tel: 01-882 0155

Islington Gazette

Planner No. 72A-240

Weekly

3 FEB 1984

MONSTROUS REGIMENT'S wagon trail rolls into the Tricycle Theatre, Kilburn High Road, Kilburn, this week with "Calamity" by Bryony Lavery - a rich theatrical mix inspired by the story of Calamity Jane, on until February 11.

Tricycle Theatre

R&C

ROMEIKE & CURTICE

THE PRESS CLIPPING BUREAU Tel: 01-882 0155

Harrow Observer

Planner No. 72A-170

Weekly - 39,357

★ Calamity set in the wild west finishes its run at the Tricycle Theatre, 296 Kilburn High Road on February 11.

★ At the Tricycle on Saturday, February 4, Caps and bells puppet theatre group presents Who, When, Where? A show for the under fives. It starts at 2pm and admission is £1.

★ A special benefit performance of a play called Poppies is being staged on Sunday February 5 at the Tricycle Theatre, Kilburn High Road, in aid of the Greenham Common peace Camp.

The production - by Gay Sweatshop - starts a week long run on February 13. All performances are at 8pm.

MONSTROUS REGIMENT

TRICYCLE

Michael Billington

Calamity

YOU CAN forget Doris Day and Jane Russell. Bryony Lavery's Calamity, which Monstrous Regiment have brought to the Tricycle, may feature the legendary Calamity Jane; but it is really an attempt to de-glamourise the Hollywood myth, to show the diverse motives that drove women westwards, and to celebrate their pioneering courage. But in destroying one myth, all it does is create another of life out West as some kind of ramshackle vaudevillian party.

Ms Lavery focuses on three women who head for Dakota in 1884 with Kohl and Middleton's Wild West Show. Calamity Jane herself is a free-swearing, buckskin toughie, who by night pens letters to her daughter. Madame Moustache is a Frenchified card-sharp and

murderess seeking death on the prairie. And quiet Kate is a fugitive from domestic imprisonment ready to do some epic whoring in her covered wagon to raise the money for a ranch. The point seems to be that frontierswomen were as much on the run as men, but that it took double the amount of guts and enterprise for them to survive in this macho world.

There is scope for an interesting play here; and I rather hoped we might see (as in Kopit's Indians) some interplay between myth-making Western show-business and the grisly reality. But Ms Lavery makes scant use of the Wild West show background. What she gives us instead is a series of songs, recitations, and scenettes in which the three women gradually disclose their backgrounds, spasmodically put the boot into men and achieve a fragile sorority.

Ms Lavery may have something to say; but she has chosen the wrong form in which to say it. And although Nona Shepphard's production features an impressive trio of covered wagons, it seems technically maladroit. Gillian Hanna works hard as the huntin', shootin', rope-spinnin' Calamity; Jane Cox reveals the raucousness inside the Bible-belling Kate, but the best performance comes from Mary McCusker, who displays a cool dexterity as the killing card-sharp. I was disappointed, however, that the show didn't tell me more or pin down the real traumas faced by women who went West.

Thursday January 26 1984

THE GUARDIAN

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Tricycle Theatre

R&C

ROMEIKE & CURTICE

THE PRESS CLIPPING BUREAU TEL: 01-492 0155

Tribune

Planner No. 73-380

Weekly

- 3 FEB 1984

mg

Creating a new female mythology

CALAMITY JANE (Tricycle Theatre) is a fabulous antidote to all those sharp-shooting, gum-chewing westerns which feed many a boring childhood.

In Bryony Lavery's play, the pretty, peripheral heroines are replaced by three wonderfully unsavoury women. Quiet Kate has escaped a dull husband and now screws her way through the wagon trail men in order to raise money for her own farm. Madame Moustache's sharp practice at the card table once led her to murder an Indian who was rather too good at the game for her liking. Calamity herself is a big, butch "cow-girl", whose fighting, shooting, cursing and boozing abilities outmatch those of any male trail blazer.

Calamity Jane is wired up for laughs, with writer Bryony Lavery on her best form — spilling out the jokes and anecdotes till your head starts to reel with

the comic detail.

She has an important political function, too, in that she creates, with every

Theatre 2

Barney Bardsley

play, a new female mythology. When I listen to her stories, never knowing which is true and which fantasy, I feel my energy reinforced, the way men must do from every conventional cultural institution.

Bryony Lavery bolsters the female ego with her work — but does she make good theatre? Given a good cast, yes, but sometimes the storytelling drags a little, and needs a stronger central plot. As an original and light-hearted look at

women in the wild West, however, *Calamity Jane* is a guaranteed fun night out.

Mime is not an easy art form. It requires concentration and a shedding of our neurotic need for constant dialogue. Unfortunately it moves too easily into an esoteric sphere, beyond the awareness of "average" audiences. One man who has transcended that difficulty, to create a tangible and inventive mime, is David Glass. His latest show, *The White Woman* (The Drill Hall) is simply magnificent.

The central character is a quivering, sensitive woman, whose animal instincts lead her to the discovery of two embryos, which she nurses and protects from the outside world, personified as "the assassin".

At this stage there is a switch from such a primitive struggle for survival to modern city life. In a series of razor

cutting interludes, suitably backed by the nervy modern music of Talking Heads and Grace Jones, David Glass sweeps us through the streets of New York, London or, indeed, any western metropolis.

We are finally drawn back to *The White Woman*, as she clammers through the wilderness, tenderly clawing her unborn babies. In one horrific scene, she is raped and battered — bereft of one embryo, and left, whimpering, with the other. But in a final tragic triumph, she gives birth to the surviving creature, even as she is dying herself.

On a small, bare stage, David Glass recreates the animal savagery and the beauty of birth, with an authenticity of emotion which is moving beyond belief. His understanding creates a fleeting opportunity for complete communication and interchange between man and woman. Glass is remarkable. See him.

MONSTROUS REGIMENT

Theatre

Calamity Tricycle

Contrasts in female role-playing, period 1884, three women set out for South Dakota in their covered waggons: Calamity Jane firing manfully into a buffalo herd with her Winchester repeater, Quiet Kate piously performing wifely chores, Madame Moustache (née Eleanor Dumont) in her calculating corsage, equally skilled at raising quick cash through impromptu gambling as satisfying another male addiction.

Bryony Lavery's play for the Monstrous Regiment company views these plucky seekers after excitement or escape - Kate from a husband, Madame from the friends of a man she killed and cooked - much as you would expect a women's theatre group to do, but making a play out of their journey poses problems she cannot solve.

In terms of the cast's skills as much as Andrea Montag's decor, *Calamity* is dressed up but has nowhere much to go, having few ideas, and those familiar enough, to sustain it. After the discovery of self-reliance, the women achieve independence and death: Madame shooting herself after professional gamblers break her bank, Calamity after a drinking session, Kate on her farm. At

least it is better than dying in childbirth after 14 pregnancies, a story Kate tells.

Gillian Hanna (Calamity) "could do anything a man could do, and wore the pants to prove it", and the jacket and waistcoat. Behind the facade of a hard-drinker who drank three bottles of whisky and threw up over the preacher's wife are memories of a daughter who had to be left behind but for whom a long, courageous diary is written.

Sporting a darkly downy upper lip between the beauty spots and the scarlet lipstick Mary McCusker (Madame) impressively shows a beleaguered woman adapting to circumstance, adopting French, German or Chinese personae as risks demand, but never losing enjoyment of coquetry.

Jane Cox (Kate) is superficially straightforward, primly discussing Episcopals versus Presbyterians, but actually most enigmatic.

Ms Lavery's writing, and Nona Sheppard's direction, leaves the audience only with the blind Calamity's "Ya've got a weapon to live how ya can" - the capacity to get out and to survive afterwards, till drink or dignified suicide or natural death claim us. There is also a suspicion that the historical characters were more interesting than they let us know.

Anthony Masters

THE TIMES THURSDAY JANUARY 26 1984

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R&C

ROMEIKE & CURTICE

THE PRESS CLIPPING BUREAU Tel: 01-882 0155

Times Educational Supplement
Planner No. 88A-80
Weekly - 87,603

FEB 1984



Jane again

Calamity.
Tricycle Theatre, London NW6.

Watching this new Monstrous Regiment show one gets the feeling that what's being portrayed on stage is scarcely more true to life than the romantic Doris Day version of Calamity Jane that it seeks to update. Apart from Jane we meet two other women, the unlikely Madame Moustache, a hardened European card sharp and Quiet Kate, the seemingly virtuous spinster. Both have murky pasts and Jane too has a skeleton in her covered wagon. Her journal reveals she has a daughter by Wild Bill Hickock. He has been killed and Jane has deserted the daughter to join a Wild West show for reasons the play fails to make clear.

Writer Bryony Lavery has come up with some fascinating Wild West anecdotes and also provides a background of historical events for the 1880's with a rather trite feminist slant: Edison invents a voting machine (women are still disenfranchised), slavery is abolished (except of course, in marriage) and Darwin discovers that men are descended from apes (but says nothing about women).

The three performers are excellent - gutsy, funny and imaginative; the songs, except for an appalling anti-sexist version of *The Deck of Cards* are well written and beautifully sung. The final image of Jane, aging, blind, guilt-ridden is touching. However, Ms Lavery gets too involved with the anecdotes and songs and seems to forget that what she set out to do was tell us what it was really like to be a late-nineteenth-century frontierswoman. The overall effect suggests a good deal of clever invention and use of material but not much direction of purposes. Ms Lavery has perhaps used the myth of Calamity to suit her own purposes. Of course Calamity didn't want to leap into a gingham dress and a man's arms in that order. But to foist on her the role of feminist heroine, or far worse feminist martyr, is equally incongruous.

Nick Baker

Hendon Times
Planner No. 72A-200
Weekly

- 2 FEB 1984

Edgware & Mill Hill Tir
Planner No. 72A-200
Weekly

- 2 FEB 1984

Pioneer women of the West

CALAMITY, by the prolific Bryony Lavery, which opened last week at the Tricycle Theatre, Kilburn, bubbles with ideas and high spirits.

Set in 1884, it features three women, one of them Calamity Jane, each travelling West with the wagon train to join a Wild West show, and to escape a past they want to forget.

With the trouser-wearing gun-toting Jane is Madame Moustache, the exotic and Quiet Kate the homely one. Their paths cross and they become friends.

The production is by Monstrous Regiment and director is Nona Sheppard. In spite of excellent performances from Jane Cox as Kate, who has a fine singing voice, Gillian Hanna as Jane and Mary McCusker as Madame, who has a great comic talent, the play sadly failed to satisfy either as a picture of the women of the settler generation or as a drama of female friendship.

For one thing the joints of the entertainment (like the hinged flaps of the three wagons on stage) creaked from time to time.

The individual ideas, pepped up with some impressive rope-spinning and card tricks, came fast and furious but at times failed to hang together as a drama.

- SALLY TOLPUTT

Wembley Observer
& Wembley News
Planner No. 72A-560
Weekly

- 3 FEB 1984



Calamity crunch



THE Tricycle theatre had a delivery with a difference last week - 2000 Wagon Wheel Biscuits.

The Theatre in Kilburn High Road is staging "Calamity" and the Wagon Wheels were handed out to the first 2000 patrons.

Calamity Jane is played by Gillian Hanna (left). With her is Quiet Kate played by Jane Cox.

The show runs until February 11.

The
News &
Travel
International

MONSTROUS REGIMENT

Fancy shootin'!



★ Making their way West are Madame Moustache played by Mary McCusker, Calamity Jane played by Gillian Hanna and Quiet Kate played by Jane Cox.

May the gophers gobble your artichokes if you don't mosey on down to the Tricycle Theatre at Kilburn and see their latest production, Calamity.

'Cause if 'en don't, ya gunna miss out on meeting three of dad blam funniest and ornery wimim ya eva gunna meet.

Calamity, complete with rope spinning, card sharpin' and some fancy shootin' is just the tonic for these dreary winter days in London.

The story line follows the adventures of three women, Calamity Jane, Madame Moustache and Quiet Kate as they battle their way through blizzards, gizzles and men to make their fame or fortune in the West.

Calamity is written by Bryony Lavery and performed and produced by Monstrous Regiment, a group which has the aim of producing political theatre based on women's experiences.

The collaboration has resulted in the creation of three wonderful characters, one who acts like a man (Calamity), one who acts like a whore (Madame Moustache) and one who acts like a Pope (Kate), each as different as chalk, cheese and soap!

Although it would have been so easy for Calamity played by Gillian Hanna, to have stolen the show, delightful characterisations by Jane Cox as Kate and Mary McCusker as Madame make that a highly entertaining balance is maintained throughout.

Calamity, with her "mouth like a buffalo's bumhole" is bound to win your heart while Madame Moustache is interested in winning your hard cash. And as for Kate all she wants is a quiet life.

As their journey across the Badlands continues to the accompaniment of a seemingly never ending supply of sound effects springing from the women's mouths we learn that each of them is carrying an extra burden.

All are on the run from something — they just don't know whether they're running towards or running away.

Each harbours loneliness and fears of the wrong kind of death while the skeletons in their closets range from secret murders to secret children, husbands or some good old fashioned "wagon wobbling" with Mr Rivers at a dollar a time.

Calamity follows the women's lives to their natural, although not always peaceful end, at a whip-crackin' pace.

Special mention should go to the designer of the ingenious wagon-train set, Andrea Montag.

The script is clever, cohesive, managing to juggle historical facts with modern perspectives and through its unlikely characters presenting us with the subtle forms which women's oppression can take.

But there is no drum beating in the preaching of this message. There doesn't need to be primarily due to the skills of the successful stunt team of actresses.

Sometimes bawdiness takes the centre stage, sometimes poignancy but throughout, Calamity is a wild west show packed with fancy shootin' that never misses its target and deserves to be a crowd-puller.

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MONSTROUS REGIMENT

Calamity/Tricycle, Kilburn

Michael Coveney

Frontier women of 1884, three of them, are discovered on green turf camping outside their wagons. One is an approximation of Calamity Jane, another the archetypal saloon bar floozy, a third the domesticated dame with sewing, and a song, in her heart.

Nothing specific is proposed by Bryony Lavery's cumbersome, pedantic and repetitive play for the Monstrous Regiment touring company. As a piece of writing it does not even aspire to the level of wit of such cinematic Western spoofs as *Blazing Saddles* or *Bronco Billy*. In spirit at least, it is closer to either of those pieces than to such genuinely creative attempts to re-write Western mythology in the theatre undertaken by Sam Shepard.

Calamity drones on in its heavy-handed way, years out of date, on topics of sexual role-playing, virility, aspiration, even food (should a rabbit shot for the pot be referred to as "jugged her?"). The cabaret is

not only boring. It is static, smug and unnecessarily familiar.

The sadness of the complete failure of a company like Monstrous Regiment to change, improve or even move with the times, is that gifted performers like Gillian Hanna and Mary McCusker keep ploughing the same old furrows. There is no animation within the performance of either actress, no light or shade, no invention beyond obvious cracks about rolling wagons, striking camps or scattering snakes. There are stock feminist remarks about Darwin, drinking, even the Blue Danube waltz.

Nona Sheppard's production moves slowly from a Wild West show audition to a pioneering scenario without ever really striking theatrical sparks on its way. The same old ghetto audience may well respond to the same old unambitious stuff. Myself, I shall stay away until I hear the noise of new ground being broken in an interesting way.

Financial Times Thursday January 26 1984

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Citizens', Glasgow

MARY BRENNAN

Calamity Jane

DORIS DAY cracked a jaunty whip as she rode the Deadwood Stage into town, Gillian Hanna — Calamity Jane in Bryony Lavery's new play currently being toured by Monstrous Regiment — spins lariats and yarns as she hitches her wagon to a touring wild west show.

Both portray rubbings taken from the same image, that of a real life character (born Martha Jane Canary in 1848) who passed into legend as a hard-bitten, hard-drinking wild west adventurer, a son of a gun in all but sex.

The truth, as threaded into this episodic play, fleshes out this myth with intriguing details of a daughter (relinquished), marriages (failed), and finally, an alcohol-assisted dwindling into blindness and death.

But Calamity is not, in the long run, about one woman's contribution to winning the west; it is in common with so much of Lavery's work — about prising apart layers of stereotyping prior to disarming them.

Alongside Calamity Jane she presents two fellow travellers often found in a Hollywood western, the world-weary saloon girl and the

chintzy homemaker. Like Calamity Jane both have a will to survive and the strength to do whatever is necessary whether it means fighting grizzly bears, murdering an opponent in a poker game or whoring to raise cash for a smallholding.

Their histories are sketched in with humour and occasional acidity, but this is neither a hard-hitting nor even a mildly emphatic, feminist piece and the best of it is in the marvellously enlivening playing of Jane Cox, Gillian Hanna and Mary McCusker; the latter, bringing a clever Dietrich-like quality to her Madam.