

WOMEN'S HERALD

CALAMITY Jane, born Martha Jane Canary (1848-1903), one of the Wild Women of the West, rapidly became a pivotal figure in her culture. In life, as on film, she was a hard drinking, rootin', tootin' shootin' dame. Hollywood of course glamourised her in numerous versions the most famous being presented by Jane Russell (1948), Yvonne De Carlo (1949), Evelyn Ankers (1950), and, of course, Doris Day (1953).

At Hollywood's insistence, however, the story went that Calamity Jane had been cleaned up, put into a nice frock and introduced to the right man who tamed her into submission, she settled down to live happily ever after.

The reality is starkly tragic. A string of broken marriages, a daughter given away at birth, she ended up blind, a heavy drinker and earning money at the latter end of her life as a caricature of her once proud self. People paid money to walk past staring at her in a Buffalo Bill sideshow.

Bryony Lavery's play for Monstrous Regiment is an attempt to show the real woman behind the celluloid. Says Ms Lavery, one of the country's leading feminist dramatists: "Our play points up the myths. In the past men have created their own myths about the West and now women are doing the same. I've embroidered the truth though the facts are authentic enough. While my play has exaggerated a little, I think it comes a lot closer to the truth of Calamity Jane than the male versions."

"In traditional male myths about the West women stood helpless in doorways and screamed for help. Most women, I believe, did not behave like that. They are far more likely to have grabbed a gun and shot the intruder whether it was a grizzly bear or a robber."

The image that men have of women in the West as docile creatures is, says Ms Lavery, totally unrealistic. "They are far more likely to have been very tough, hard-drinking women capable of standing up for their rights. They had to be in order to survive."

The decision to do a play about Calamity Jane came after one member of the cast, Gillian Hanna, came across a slim volume entitled Calamity Jane's Letters to her Daughter while browsing in a London bookshop.

Says Gillian, who plays the part of Calamity Jane: "I was totally fascinated by this book. To start with, I had no idea she had a daughter. I was struck by the difference between the popular image of Calamity Jane from Hollywood movies and the picture of the real woman that emerged from the letters."

Monstrous Regiment then asked Bryony Lavery to do a play based on the letters, which reveal a woman half tough and half soft. A woman who gave away her baby Jean but then kept a careful album of letters and recipes including one for a 30-year cake to her daughter after her death so that she would have something to remember her mother.

Says Lavery: "The album shows a very different picture to the hard woman that people imagine. It's all about her daily life going off on trails and earning money cooking for outlaws as well as her many adventures. She was able to go into Indian territory without coming to any harm. The Indians thought her crazy and never touched her."

Calamity Jane appears to have had

TOMORROW night Calamity Jane opens at the Citizens' Theatre, Glasgow, and in this production by Monstrous Regiment, the radical women's theatre group, they offer a refreshing and realistic look at one of the great names of the Wild West.

Instead of the glamourised, sanitised Hollywood version, Monstrous Regiment create their own female myths about this legendary hard-shooting, drinking, cursing,

Wild Woman of the West, a myth closer to reality than the one dreamed up in the past by male movie moguls.

Monstrous Regiment bring this production to Glasgow after a highly successful week in Rome at an international women's festival where they were the only British participants. ANN SHAW reports.



Calamity Jane — a glamorous Jane Russell stars with Bob Hope.



Calamity Jane — here it's Yvonne de Carlo.

Shot down — the pretty image of Calamity Jane



Calamity Jane — as played by Doris Day.



Calamity Jane, the reality as seen by Monstrous Regiment.

a number of marriages but they rarely lasted for any length of time though at one stage she did settle long enough to own a ranch but after a year or two she would upsticks and hit the trail once again. She did a variety of work including a spell as a nurse, a scout for Custer and she rode for the Pony Express, as well driving the Deadwood Stage. During one cholera epidemic she helped nurse some poor people who couldn't afford food so she held up a food store at gunpoint.

All this and more is revealed in her letters to her daughter, Jean, whom she met once but did not reveal her identity. Her daughter was already married when she did eventually discover her mother's true identity and she set about tracing as much as she could of her mother's biography which she then published in a book called Calamity Jane Exposed. Jean appears to have been very proud of her famous mother.

Calamity Jane was one of the first

women to wear trousers, more as a practical measure for work than to defy convention; though it infuriated many of the wild men of the West.

On one occasion in a saloon she was grabbed by the hair by a bunch of men who tried to cut it off. All the time calling her a whore.

Gillian Hanna adds: "The saddest thing about her was that she was a woman who out-lived her time. In the end there was no place for a woman

like her in the West. It had become respectable. She ended up in a Buffalo Bill show as a parody of herself. Sometimes she did her shooting tricks, other times she just sat there while people walked past viewing her as some kind of freak."

She died in her early 50s, her eyes failed her and she became blind. The end came after a heavy bout of drinking some bad whisky. She got on a train, became extremely ill, and died shortly afterwards.



Martha Jane Canary, known to history as Calamity Jane. This photograph of her belongs to the Thomas Gilcrease Institute in Tulsa, Oklahoma.



Mary McCusker: born around the corner from Citizens'

Nostalgic trip for actress Mary

RETURNING to the Gorbals theatre has more than a touch of nostalgia for actress Mary McCusker. For she was born and brought up just around the corner from the Citizens' in Crown Street, now partly demolished.

"I always look forward to coming back to Glasgow, especially to the Citizens," says Mary. The last time was in 1980 when Monstrous Regiment produced Gentlemen Prefer Blondes — which played to packed houses.

Mary's interest in the theatre had an auspicious beginning: a House of Fraser amateur dramatic society. Mary explains "I was born in the Gorbals and went to St Luke's School. Then the family moved to Pollok. I left

school at 15 to become a window dresser with Richards then I joined the House of Fraser department store. They started an amateur dramatic company and their first production was Oklahoma. I got a job in the chorus. I loved it and became more and more involved in amateur productions."

Eventually she was encouraged to try for the Royal Scottish Academy of Dramatic Art at the ripe old age of 24. "No one was more surprised than me to hear after I had been auditioned that I'd been accepted."

She left drama college in 1971 and has never looked back. She is one of the founders of Monstrous Regiment, set up in 1973 by a group of women who wanted to make political theatre based

on women's experiences and using live music.

As their name suggests they use theatre to answer John Knox's polemical treatises against the "monstrous regiment of women". On the theatrical circuit the group are known affectionately as "The Monsters".

In the current production, Mary plays the part of Madame Montastache, another larger-than-life Wild Woman in the West, a notorious murderess, gambler and sharpshooter. "But I make her quite a lovable character," adds Mary.

"You have to remember that a lot of women in those days did make a living by gambling, many carried guns

and were not afraid to use them. Some were sharpshooters like Madame Montastache. She lived a particular way which was very tough and hard and when she could no longer live like that she shot herself. She was 36."

Along with others in the company she has immersed herself in the history of the Wild West for this production. "The Hollywood version is a lot cleaner than the reality. Water was a scarce commodity. People would often go for four months without washing. When they moved they took all their bits of furniture with them and it could take six to eight months to trek to the West. The very poor did it with their possessions in wheelbarrows. Many died on the journey."



Gillian Hanna

MONSTROUS REGIMENT

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It's no Calamity not to get into the West End

Three actresses, plus the imposing presence of three huge, covered wagons and a great deal of expertise will tonight re-create the Wild West in song and story at the Seagull Theatre, Lowestoft.

The Monstrous Regiment group is presenting "Calamity" by Bryony Lavery — the 24th play she has written since she gave up a teaching career.

Tonight's production is the first of a lengthy tour. After three nights at the Seagull, the company will go on to Wells, followed by 15 other dates before the tour ends at Brighton Pavilion in December.

A veteran in play writing, if not in years, Bryony has not yet hit the West End, nor does she want to. "I prefer what I call the alter-

native theatre, places like the Seagull, the Civic at Scunthorpe, the Dovecote at Stockton on Tees," she says. "I shall never get rich, but it is so much more exciting and rewarding in every other way."

Nor do the three other members of the group — Gillian Hanna, Mary McCusker and Jane Cox — cast longing eyes on the West End.

"The West End is not the pinnacle, far from it," says Gillian. "There is so much rubbish there. So many people seem to think that if you are in the theatre your sights are set on the West End, stardom, your name in lights. It's not like that, I suppose, from time to time, we would all take parts in the West End or on television just to get enough money to pay the mortgage, etc., and enable us to go on doing what we love — this."

"Calamity" gets away from the

popular myth of a blonde-haired cutie warbling "Once I had a secret love." Creating a fresh Calamity Jane has been fun, says Gillian, particularly learning lassoing and rope work from the world champion rope spinner, Alf Laredo.

Not to be outdone, Mary has swotted up on card tricks with the Great Kavori. Songs and music for the show have been written by the third member of the group, Jane Cox and the show is directed by Nona Sheppard.

On a tour taking in 17 different places — and memories of other tours and other towns — Mary confesses that they sometimes become a little confused as to exactly where they are. They tend to remember various theatres by their idiosyncracies.

"There is one theatre, for instance," she recalls, "where, if

you want to go to the loo, you have to come down off the stage and make your way through the audience. Of course, you don't want to do that during the interval, it spoils the atmosphere. It does sometimes seem a very long last act."

Then there is the theatre where, to exit one side of the stage and enter at the other, involves a dash round the building and through the bar. A bit of a nightmare at the best of times, but calamity when someone has locked one of the doors.

When this "Calamity" closes in December, it is back to writing for Bryony — her 25th play which will take as its theme the General Strike, another play which, she hopes, will not see the West End. "I might like the money," she muses, "but no, I make a living as I am now — and it's fun."

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