

MONSTROUS REGIMENT

NURSING SISTER

Jane Edwards outlines a novel new theatrical biography of Florence Nightingale.

Any schoolgirl who shouts 'Nightingale!' from the touchline of a house hockey match knows that Florence Nightingale was the 'Lady with the Lamp' who went to the Crimean War and rescued wounded soldiers from certain death. It says a lot about the Victorian age that it took an energetic, powerful, administrative genius and immortalised her as a delicate, sweet angel drifting between the beds at night. And the myth goes on today. Just take a look at the back of a £10 note. There she is, encapsulated in the nurturing role from which feminists now long to break free.

Monstrous Regiment's new show 'Enslaved By Dreams' is based on Nightingale's own papers (she was a prodigious letter writer). It didn't take long for deviser directors Chris Bowler and Jo Anderson to discover that Nightingale was a complex figure who inexplicably took to her bed on her return from the Crimea and remained there, surrounded by cats, for the next 50 years. From her bed she ruled an empire: messenger boys were run off their feet as demands, pleas, complaints and questions poured forth from her pen. She funded the first school of nursing — until her time, nursing was considered a gin-soaked, whoring, disreputable profession — and she became, as a result of her famous questionnaires, the country's greatest living expert on India. No new Viceroy left for India without first visiting her for information. And yet, this meticulous, resourceful woman often suffered nervous collapses, spoke of suicide and thought of herself as a failure. Jealous and manipulative, she was perhaps damaged by her struggle to overcome her own and others' prejudice and realise her ambitions.

Drawn by the parallels between Nightingale's obsessions and those that absorb many women today, Bowler and Anderson have bravely fixed on an impressionistic interpretation of her life with a combination of realistic scenes and surreal images. Bowler says it would take the RSC or the

the right documentation. The older woman, the bed-ridden reformer, is played by Celia Gore-Booth, founder member of Shared Experience and an ex-performer with Le Grand Magic Circus.

It's a talented cast with a fine set, covered in screeds of scrawled paper, by experienced fringe designer Gemma Jackson. But watching them rehearse, in conditions that would have had Nightingale reaching for her scrubbing brush, the three



National to stage it realistically. Nightingale is played by three actresses, highlighting the different aspects of her personality and periods of her life. Sally Cranfield, ex-founder member of Hesitate and Demonstrate, is the young woman, whining, frustrated and often ill, who didn't find the courage to break away from her comfortable, civilised background until she was in her early thirties. Tasmin Heatley is the resourceful, highly motivated woman who went to the Crimea and used all her energy to fight the diseases that ran rife and the administrative incompetence that allowed men to die without bandages for the lack of

of them, in a mixture of tracksuits and Victorian crinolines, attempting a forward roll over a chaise longue to the sound of a Viennese waltz and Middle Eastern music, it was hard to tell whether the subtleties and complexities of their subject matter were suitable for such a treatment. The combination of their talents, Gemma Jackson's set, Steve Whitson's lighting and Chris Bowler's direction could make an inspiring or confusing evening, but whatever happens their infectious enthusiasm for this extraordinary woman will surely shine through.

'Enslaved by Dreams' is playing at the ICA. See Theatre: Fringe listings.

Time Out - 23 Feb - 1 March '84

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