

# MONSTROUS REGIMENT

## Monstrous Regiment argue on radiation poisoning



RAISSA PAGE/FORMAT

*Alarms*, a new play by Susan Yankowich is an eerie thriller that probes the murky post-Chernobyl irradiated world.

A Mr Deal lurks behind an anonymous door planning terror, intrigue and misinformation. He wants to eliminate Dr. C whose vision of the effects of radiation is not very helpful. Susan Yankowich is one of the leading writers of the New York Theatre. She wrote 'Slaughterhouse' for Joseph Papp's Open Theatre and has published a novel 'Silent Witness'.

Monstrous Regiment is producing the play at the Riverside Theatre and it is directed by Penny Cherns. It will run from February 11th - 28th. For more details Tel. 01-247 2398.

See also review on p32.

SANITY JANUARY 1987

## THEATRE

### A BLESSING OR A CURSE?

*ALARMS* by Susan Yankowitz.

Performed by Monstrous Regiment  
February 11th-28th, Riverside Theatre, London

'In the deafening roar of the world, who will hear you if you don't scream?'

But if you do shout your fears out loud, you're dismissed as hysterical, unscientific, just a woman. Last April, Susan Yankowitz and members of Monstrous Regiment were holding workshops to explore the Cassandra myth - the story of a woman blessed with the gift of prophecy and then cursed that she will not be believed. As the actors/actresses worked on the themes of foresight and disaster, the Libyan bombings happened. And Chernobyl. The connection was inescapable - the 20th century's Trojan Horse, the gift we welcome inside our gates to our own destruction, is the nuclear industry.

In *Alarms*, Cassandra becomes Dr C, an obstetrician disturbed by the number of stillbirths and genetic mutations suffered by the wives of workers in nuclear power plants. She voices her concerns, speaks out against the use of radiation therapies, and refuses to use x-rays. Here the worlds of legend, science fiction, and real life merge - a scientist called

Alice Stewart warned of the dangers of x-rays as long ago as 1958. She's now in her 80s and is only just beginning to receive the recognition her pioneering and scrupulous research deserves. Like her, Dr C is rejected by her own peer-group, the medical establishment.

Mary McCusker, who plays Dr C, says she believes most women rely on men for affirmation and verification - a lone female voice will be discredited and eventually seen as mad since sanity is defined by the male majority. The theme of madness is evident not only in *Alarms*, but also in Mary's account of the cast's reactions as they researched nuclear issues. They were frequently shocked into exclaiming, 'But it doesn't make sense. It's crazy!'

Mary says that at first she found Dr C's commitment and intensity hard to identify with: 'It seemed unnatural for her to suddenly start quoting statistics about nuclear power in the middle of a conversation about something totally unrelated. But then, as I read more I began to understand. It does become an obsession when you realise how much of your life it affects. I found myself doing the same thing - I'd be having a romantic dinner and I'd start talking about the probabilities of a Chernobyl in Britain. Or I'd look at what I was eating and start talking about all the chemicals in the fish or whatever. . . I haven't had one pleasant dream since we started *Alarms*.'

Dr C is persecuted by the repulsive Mr Deal and his spies who 'can torture, if we must, without using our hands'. But she believes she must be a witness to the truth; when her lover warns her, 'In the old stories, the messenger is killed. People like you sound the alarm before the fire breaks out'. She responds 'And you don't see the flames until your house is destroyed.'

Monstrous Regiment are still revising the play after almost every performance; having only read the script, it is difficult to tell whether all the strands of this complicated play do mesh on stage, but some of the dialogue is as chilling as that of the Chernobyl 'experts': 'If you would prefer to be doubly safe, though we assure you that you are perfectly safe as it is, it is advised that you immediately scrub exposed areas of the body with a stiff scrubbing brush and though it is unnecessary, scrub and scrub and scrub. . . There are times when I find it depressing that so many authors writing about nuclear issues find it necessary to use either a mythological or a science-fiction setting. The dangers exist in our own world and they exist now. But in *Alarms*, the connections are obvious and the question is still as vital: 'Is it a blessing or a curse to see into the future?'

● Elizabeth George

### MONSTROUS REGIMENT

presents

### ALARMS

by SUSAN YANKOWITZ

9th to 28th February 1987

RIVERSIDE STUDIOS

LONDON W6

By refusing to use X-rays

Dr C alienates her colleagues

By refusing to compromise

she alienates her lover

By refusing to keep quiet

she loses her freedom

By refusing to care

we may lose everything

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Registered Office: 49 South  
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Directors: Ms C Bowler, Ms S J Bailey  
Ms G L Hanna, Ms M McCusker

## Monstrous Regiment theater company

# Entertaining with politics

By PATRICIA GREEN

It's late afternoon. In the Green Room of Smith College's Mendenhall Performing Arts building, two students are rehearsing a scene.

"People like you sound the alarm before the fire breaks out."

"And people like you don't see the flames until your house is destroyed!"

The dialogue is from American playwright Susan Yankowitz's "Alarms," which the British women's theater, Monstrous Regiment, is currently performing on a tour of Massachusetts. Monstrous Regiment arrived at Smith College Monday to do a workshop entitled "Poetic Images in Theatrical Form" with Smith students. The "monsters," as they affectionately call one another, turned over to workshop participants fragments of script that they themselves performed the following evening at Smith's Hallie Flanagan Theater.

Mary McCusker, a slender, amated woman of 43, is a founding member of Monstrous Regiment. The company, she says, was conceived by a "happy chance." In September of 1975, 11 women who all auditioned for the same role with another troupe, met to discuss the lack of opportunities for women in theater. It was a fortuitous meeting, for out of it sprang Monstrous Regiment, one of Britain's first professional women's theater groups. The theater's unusual appellation derives from a speech by John Knox, a 16th-century Scottish protestant reformer who wrote a pamphlet railing against the "Monstrous Regiment of Women," crying that the power of women needed to be curtailed before it got out of hand.

Because of the eminent professional reputations of the ensemble's members, the group has been subsidized by the Arts Council of Great Britain. With steady funding for company salaries, the company has produced a series of dazzling and successful productions, playing to women's and mainstream audiences in Great Britain and abroad.

Monstrous Regiment's most recent play, "Alarms," features McCusker as Dr. C., a modern-day Cassandra who tries to sound a warning against nuclear power. Last spring, while the cast was "workshopping" the play with author Susan Yankowitz, the accident at Chernobyl shook the world.

"I remember having dinner at a restaurant and hearing reports that the radiation cloud was moving toward England," says McCusker. "It was a lovely spring evening; it was so strange that this thing was coming toward us, and that it was invisible. I haven't had pleasant dreams since I started work on 'Alarms.'"

McCusker notes an awareness of nuclear power here that she seldom finds in Britain. "A lot of people there act like pollution only hurts people who believe in it."

"It's free to get in, costs to get out!" joked McCusker, as she flagged down students for Monday's workshop. After the informal group exchanged names and brief biographies, actors Tim Gatti and McCusker led a series of acting exercises which got the fledgling actors gambling across the room.

Later, sprawled on the green carpet in a circle, the students issued forth a variety of exotic sounds,



MARY McCUSKER, one of the founders of the British women's theater group, Monstrous Regiment, conducts a relaxation exercise with Smith College students. (Photo by George Newton)

collectively conjuring first a rain-drenched jungle, then a parched red desert and, finally, an icy tundra.

"The scenes were so hilarious in your funny American accents," said actress Sue Rogerson, watching the student interpretations of "Alarms." After the workshop, the "monsters" chatted with students. The English transplants were particularly eager to elicit advice on how to weather the horrors of American central heating. "Have you Americans adapted? Sorrounded extra cartilage in your noses or evolved a differently shaped wind-pipe to deal with the wretched dry air?" wondered McCusker.

"A lot of people were surprised by Monstrous Regiment's first produc-

tion, in 1976," said McCusker. "The media have given feminists an image of being dry, humorless and bellyaching. A common refrain was, 'I never thought women could be so entertaining.'"

While the company does not exclude men, women are the decision-makers and are always the majority. This has created adjustment problems for some men who have joined the group.

"That first play mirrored our own experience," said McCusker. "Set in a Paris commune of 1871, the women characters have no boss figure — and neither did we. It was something I'd never experienced before."

"I think a lot of women don't notice that they don't have any

power because they're coping so well. There's a line in 'Alarms' in which a man says, 'I like power. Don't you?' and the woman responds, 'I don't know. I've never had any.' That's what it was like for us. There were no blueprints as we began making women's theater. You can't describe a rainbow until you've seen one."

In recent years, McCusker has seen the status of women's theater rise and fall. "In Britain, women's theater is slowly being accepted by mainstream culture, but you're still required to justify yourself. Unfortunately, there is an idea that women's theater has dried up, that everything's been said. It's often claimed that there are only seven plots. But no one would dream of telling men to stop doing theater just because Shakespeare has already covered all seven."

In contrasting women's theater in Britain with that in the United States, McCusker believes that economics play a central role. "In Britain," she says, "even fringe theater is unionized, and more funding is available. I've been struck by how many American women work other jobs in addition to their theater work. American women's plays I've seen most often focus on personal experience without making larger connections. Women's theater should be epic as well as personal. But it takes time and money to make those connections. That's very difficult to do when you're working as women are here, on stolen time."


"Monstrous Regiment," McCusker recalled, "started off small. If we'd started any smaller, we wouldn't have survived. Too often things are kept going through women's commitment, but just because you're political and committed doesn't mean you should have to starve."

"I've gained a strength from working with other women that I couldn't have gotten anywhere else," noted McCusker.

To what would undoubtedly be John Knox's dismay, the "Monstrous Regiment" continues its forward march.

"Ideas are very potent," says McCusker. "It is possible to have an impact."

THINKING OF



OUR  
40th  
YEAR

THINK OF

**DeGrandpre**  
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to fit your budget.

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THURSDAY MARCH 19 1987