

# THE LEICESTER HAYMARKET

## Maggie rises

(33) 536898

PLAYING the alcoholic Becca in Central's Aids serial *Intimate Contact* has come as quite a contrast to Maggie Steed's most famous television role to date — Rita in *Shine on Harvey Moon*.

"Rita was such a wonderful woman," says the auburn-haired actress who worked with the Belgrade's Theatre in Education company during the 70s.

"But Becca . . . although she's highly intelligent, she has been too well-looked after for her own good. Consequently she's now paying the price."

### Careful

The drama concludes tonight with the pain caused to the Gregory family by public fear and prejudice over the disease continuing after Clive's death.

"Alma Cullen's script has been so carefully written that everyone in the series has had their own tale to tell," adds Maggie.

"I think it was a bold step to take. And when you consider it was written before the scare here really arrived, it makes it all the more remarkable."

Maggie's Becca character — the first person to support the ostracised Gregorys after the news of Clive's condition broke out — has claimed a good deal of attention. "Which is quite fortunate for me," she admits.

### Premiere

"It has put Rita in the shadows. Of course I could have gone on playing her forever, everyone in *Harvey Moon* loved the series, but none of us would ever have been able to do anything different."

And doing "different" things, taking on challenging new plays, is important to the former TIE actor-teacher who came to Coventry with her friend Sue Johnston (Sheila in *Brookside*) for two years back in 1973.

This Wednesday she opens in an intriguing piece of theatre at Leicester Hay-

## to drama challenge

By SYLVIA RAWLINGS

market Studio. In the British premiere of Wendy Kesselman's reconstruction of a famous real-life murder story of the 1930s, *My Sister in This House*, Maggie plays the ill-fated head of a French household who is murdered by her maids.

The play is based on a French crime which took place in Le Mans in 1933 when two sisters murdered their employer and her daughter. The incident, whose solitary and bizarre violence shocked French society, inspired the dramatist Jean Genet to write *The Maids*.

"It's a fascinating play," says Maggie. "You see, no-one at the time could really make out what had happened. The two sisters were seen as perfect servants, although their employer exploited them and never spoke to them . . . just left them little notes."

"In Wendy Kesselman's version of the crime we discover they came from a deprived background and had been brought up in a convent by nuns. It becomes obvious that one of the sisters is disturbed as we are let into their bedroom secrets — the bedroom being the only place where they are functioning as people instead of servants."

Maggie started her career in Leicester, at the Phoenix Theatre, after studying at Bristol Old Vic Theatre School. She has appeared with the RSC in Edward Bond's *The War Plays* (for which she won the Time Out Fringe Award) and in Howard Barker's *Crimes in Hot Countries*.

She says she is turning her back on TV for a while. "Far too many interesting plays are coming up," insists the actress who spends a huge proportion of her spare time working for Nicaraguan Solidarity.

"I became involved five years ago when I first went to help with the coffee harvest," she says. "Now I help fund trips for other people who want to go out there in an attempt to understand the country's problems and help."



Maggie Steed: doing "different" things and taking on challenging new plays is important to the former TIE actor-teacher

COVENTRY EVENING TELEGRAPH



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# THE LEICESTER HAYMARKET THEATRE

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# LEICESTER Mail

THURSDAY, MARCH 26, 1987

LEICESTER 539539

No 652

## Murder, mystery and outrage!

# LEISURE

**MURDER,** mystery and outrage come to the Haymarket Studio next month with the innovative *My Sister In This House* in its UK Premiere.

The Wendy Kesselman play is based on the true story of the bizarre murders of a Frenchwoman and her daughter by their female servants.

It was an incident which outraged France in 1933 and remains shocking by today's standards – the mother and daughter were not just killed but their bodies horribly mutilated.

"This is a real drama – but very funny at times as well," said actress Suzanna Hamilton.

"The play looks at what led the two servants to commit such a horrific crime – I think I now understand how this murder occurred, and I think the audience will too – and will sympathise with them."

Although the action is set in 1933, with the four actresses wearing period costume, the play is not stylised or difficult to understand.



Suzanna Hamilton – who is on stage at the Haymarket from April 1.

"And the relationships which are explored, the way people treat each other, the way that people can be emotionally repressed and retarded are still all highly relevant to today," added Suzanna.

*My Sister* has been a huge hit in the USA where it won the Susan Smith Blackburn prize.

Directed by Nancy Meckler it runs at the Studio from April 1 to 25 before touring Glasgow and Birmingham.



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## S-T-E-P-P-I-N out

### Theatre



*My Sister In This House - in rehearsal*

Meckler makes her mark - and says goodbye

Nancy Meckler is leaving the Haymarket studio in dramatic style.

For her last production at the Leicester studio theatre is *My Sister In This House*, a play of murder, mystery and outrage, which she describes as "a more dramatic version of *Upstairs, Downstairs*."

The play is based on a real-life impulsive murder by two sisters of their rich employer and

daughter, a crime which shocked French bourgeois society in 1933, the setting in which the attack happened.

The play won an award in the United States where it has been performed widely. British audiences get their first chance to see it between April 1 and 25 in a co-production between the Haymarket and Monstrous Regiment, one of Britain's foremost women's theatre companies.

When Nancy arrived at the Haymarket three years ago she set up the Studio Company to take on the "riskier" productions and experiment with others.

**Steppin Out April 1987**



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## Leicester Mercury

SATURDAY, MARCH 28, 1987

17p

### Fond memories of a tough-talking lady

Strong women seem to be the forte of actress Maggie Steed, star of Shine on Harvey Moon.

As tough-talking Rita she kept the Moon family together and although she's now moved on, she looks back fondly to the TV series.

"It was a great experience because we had a lot of time together as a cast and we were like a family. In the series women had a hard time and Rita started out as a good-time girl and became a mother," said Maggie, who is appearing on TV at the moment in Intimate Contact.

"She managed to earn, keep her family together and have a good time.

"It's rare to get such a part that shows varying sides of a woman's character," she added.

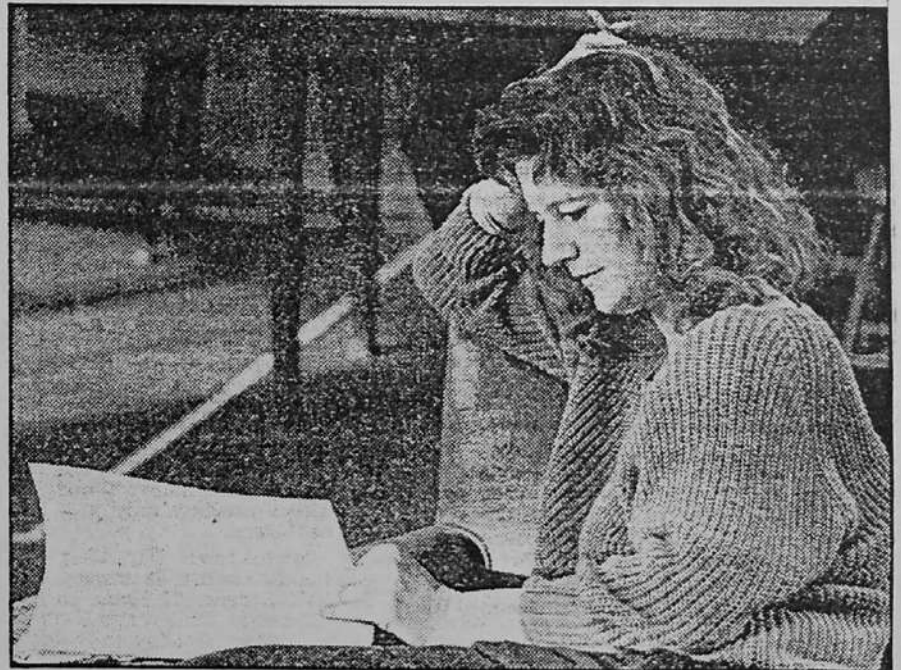
Maggie has joined Monstrous Regiment, a women's theatre company, for her new role in a bizarre murder story My

Sister in This House, directed by Nancy Meckler and holding its British premiere at the Haymarket Studio next week.

The play is based on an actual murder incident in France in 1933.

The storyline in My Sister in This House where two maids murder their employers fascinates Maggie who plays the Madame. "The Madame and the daughter never spoke to the two girls, they used to leave notes for them. It is about women being very isolated and about power.

"The sisters really went mad and the murders were particularly gruesome. But in their trial the girls said Madame was a very good employer and it had all happened because an iron fused!"



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## GETTING OUT ALIVE

### THEATRE

Women, violence and murder set in a stifling French household are the key ingredients for an already highly acclaimed new play. CAROLE WODDIS talks to the women behind 'My Sister In This House'.

**W**omen tend not to go out looking for a "bit of trouble". When women are pushed to violence, it's because of mind-bending pressures on them that make them finally snap.' Gillian Hanna of the women's theatre group, Monstrous Regiment is talking about the group's latest project, 'My Sister In This House'.

Wendy Kesselman's play won its first critics award—the Susan Smith Blackburn Prize—back in 1981. Subsequently produced by repertory companies coast to coast, this is its first showing over here.

Based on the gruesome murder in Le Mans in the early '30s of a wealthy French Madame and her daughter by their servants, two sisters, it's the same incident that inspired Jean Genet's 'The Maids'. That play, written for men and customarily played in drag, used the event as a metaphor to explore familiar Genetesque themes—fantasy, ritual, domination, and aspects of sado-masochism—with a typically glittering kind of stylised extravagance.

Kesselman's treatment, by contrast, builds its horror through subtlety and sparse dialogue. Her four characters—Madame Danzard, daughter Isabelle, the sisters Christine and Lea—are written for women. This is no female refraction seen through the male gaze but rather a microscopic examination of female relationships—of class oppression and the psychic merging of one personality with another.

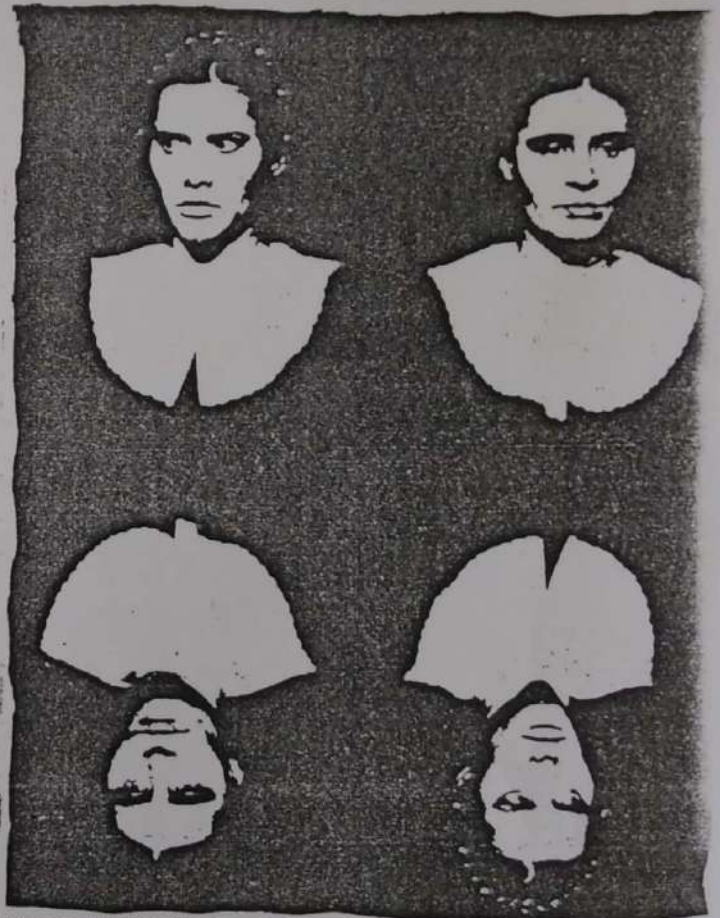
Says Kesselman: 'It was the merging of the sisters that drew me like a magnet. I didn't

sit down to write a play on the themes of class and repression.' But she did read of the incident one rainy February day in Janet Flanner's 'Paris Was Yesterday' and became absorbed by its psychological and emotional implications.

How had the sisters been brought to that point? Reading reports of the trial, the chain of events that led to the murders took shape in Kesselman's mind more and more as the girls' flight from reality into their own world of fantasy. Exacerbated by the claustrophobia of their lives—virtually living in one room—and set against a background of convent-reared devout Catholicism, she also found another key in the stifling conventions of bourgeois, provincial France: 'If I'd lived in that town, I'd never have got out alive.'

The scene is therefore set—a pressure cooker of dynamics as the sisters go about their work in the Danzard household, noiselessly, unacknowledged. As the play develops, we see the relationships undergoing a series of subtle power shifts: that between the sisters, already bound to each other through a blood knot at the wrist, becomes incestuous: Lea, the younger begins to exert emotional domination over Christine, the older and originally the more dominant.

Juxtaposed as this is against the later violence, it poses awkward questions around stereotypes of women loving women and violence. Gillian Hanna: 'I've always seen the incest as incidental, a metaphor for a world where the girls are isolated, for their being two halves of one personality, like twins. It's about a psychosis.'



Lea (Maggie O'Neill) and Christine (Suzanna Hamilton): sisters merging for murder.

In America, says Wendy Kesselman, feminists have been split in their reactions. Kate Millet, for example, loved it.

Monstrous Regiment's production, directed by Nancy Meckler and with Maggie Steed, Tilly Vosborough, Suzanna Hamilton and Maggie O'Neill heading the cast, has already won plaudits from an early showing in Leicester—not surprisingly given its

shimmering electricity and humour (especially from Steed's Mme Danzard).

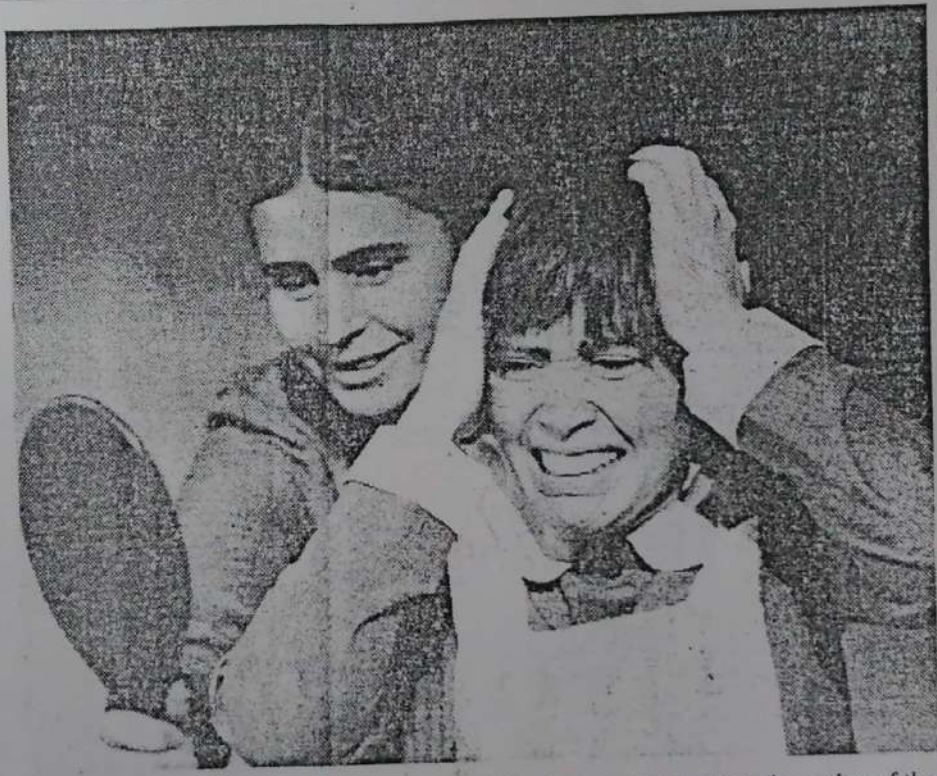
But 'My Sister' is also bound to provoke heated discussion as a sensitive reclamation of a piece of history that raises even more questions about women's lives. ●

'My Sister In This House' opens at Hampstead Theatre on Tuesday. See: Fringe for details.



Hamp. Th  
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On February 2 1933, two young peasant sisters, working as maids in the French provincial town of Le Mans, turned on their mistress and ferociously hacked her and her daughter to death. Their weapons included a pewter pitcher, various knives, one of them blunt, and, most unnerving of all, their fingers. After the crime the sisters reverted to their previous demure behaviour, so perfectly servant-like that they had been known as "the pearls of Le Mans". This murder was to inspire Genet's play *Les Bonnes*, where two maids envy and plot to poison their mistress. Later still, a chance reading of an account of the trial fired the American playwright Wendy

Kesselman to try to uncover the motives of the real life sisters. *My Sister in this House* was produced in Louisville in 1981 and went on to play New York, winning the Susan Smith Blackburn prize. Nancy Meckler's production of a revised version premiered in Leicester last month, and after touring to Birmingham and Glasgow opens tonight at the Hampstead Theatre Club. Suzanna Hamilton and Maggie O'Neill (left and right, above) play the maids, Maggie Steed and Tilly Vosburgh their targets. Hampstead Theatre Club, Avenue Road, Swiss Cottage, London NW3 (01-722 9301) Monday to Saturday 8pm, Saturday matinee 4.30pm, £6-£7. *Jeremy Kingston*