

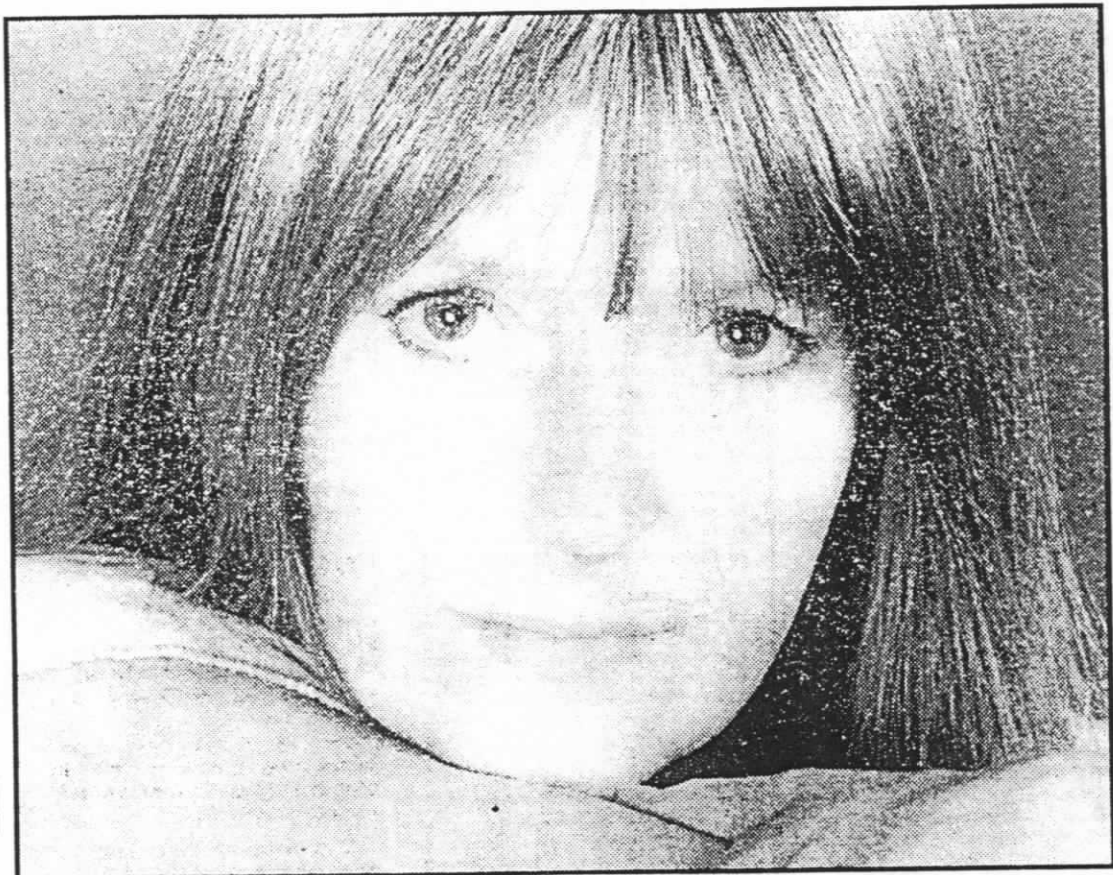
THE SCOTSMAN

No. 45,429

Saturday, 8 April, 1989

3 a.m. news

Price 30p



Mary McCusker: demanding role in a one-woman show as a 14th century French peasant

All passion unspent

SHE seems to have been a powerhouse of passion, sexual, emotional, physical. It was an extraordinary life at an extraordinary time. The little village of Montailou in the French Pyrenees was the last stronghold of the heretical Cathar sect, the Inquisition was being horribly inquisitive, and Beatrice de Planissoles was living out her life with gusto, courage and irreverence.

The play *Beatrice*, which opens at the Traverse Theatre, Edinburgh on Tuesday, is based on the real historical Beatrice, a proud 14th century peasant, who among her many husbands and lovers included both orthodox and heretical priests. It sounds the perfect subject for

Monstrous Regiment, the radical feminist theatre group. Their aim is to place women's experience centre stage, and their committed, collective approach has led to leading playwrights being commissioned to create new works for them.

The playwright in this case is a man: Ian Brown (not the Ian Brown who is director of the Traverse, but his namesake in the Arts Council). He's delighted to work with an erstwhile Edinburgh colleague, Mary McCusker, who takes the one-woman title role, a gift surely for any actress of pride and strength.

Catherine Lockerbie

April 9, 1989

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History's lesson in human nature

JULIE MORRICE on the première of a one-woman play about a 14th century heretic

BEATRICE de Planissoles lived in a tiny village in the Pyrenees. She had four daughters, two husbands, several lovers and spent a year in prison on a charge of heresy. She was, says Mary McCusker who brings her back to life in *Beatrice*, which has its première at Edinburgh's Traverse Theatre this week, "perfectly ordinary but also perfectly extraordinary, like most people really are".

It is by a rare chance that there is so much information available about Beatrice and her fellow villagers. Were it not for a scrupulous Inquisitor, Jacques Fournier, and his tireless scribes, the inhabitants of Montailou would have sunk into obscurity along with the rest of 14th century rural France. As it is, her words, recorded by Fournier in his search for heretics, unearthed by historian Emanuel Leroy Ladurie and dramatised by playwright Ian Brown, are brought to life after centuries.

But fascinating as it is, all the historical detail is treated as a backdrop to the story of Beatrice herself. She was involved with the Cathars, a religious sect that the Inquisition was trying to stamp out, yet also entangled with a powerful, unscrupulous priest, who frequently serviced the Inquisition. Her tormented loyalties are at the centre of the play. "She lives through extraordinary times," says McCusker. "But she's still there at the end. She survives."

The one-woman play, directed by Clare Venables, artistic director at the Crucible Theatre in Sheffield, follows Beatrice's emotional journey as she thinks back over an eventful, painful life. "She's a woman prowling about her home at night with her cup of coffee



Mary McCusker: emotional journey back in time

going 'Why? Why did I do this? How do I explain it? How do I tell? How do I begin?'"

Beatrice is presented by Monstrous Regiment, a company set up in 1975 by a group of actors who wanted to see women's experience more realistically reflected in the theatre. McCusker is a founder member, and feels that the company has not only been successful in itself, but has helped provoke mainstream theatre into a better representation of women. She would still like to see more women in influential positions at centres like the National Theatre and the Royal Shakespeare Company: "It would be nice if it wasn't still such a thing of, oh, gosh, isn't it great they've got a woman director."

The original group of performers with Monstrous Regiment now act as a collective management, commissioning plays but not necessarily acting in them: "You can't really keep touring permanently for 15 years," says McCusker, ruefully. "Well I can't — my body won't take it." Financial considerations also rank high. The early days of accepting half pay or no pay in order to stage a new play cannot be indefinitely sustained.

The Traverse première of *Beatrice* is the first of Monstrous Regiment's new season of portable plays which can be easily and fairly cheaply toured. New York beckons, so, possibly, does Turkey, and the company has looked beyond Britain for material. A Finnish play later this year will be followed by a new adaptation from Marivaux's subtle French.

The wider relevance of *Beatrice*, which may make it accessible to both Turks and Americans, lies in the play's tough examination of her love affair. No soppy story this: Beatrice's liaison with Pierre Clergue began when he shoved his hand up her skirt in the confessional and ended with her betraying him to the Inquisition. In between, this Catholic priest split his time between terrorising the villagers and bedding their wives.

McCusker says: "But she betrayed him, and that is a very painful thing to live with." Whether or not to stand by your man against the odds is clearly not just a 20th century dilemma.

"It was such a difficult time," sighs McCusker. "But sometimes I get this terrible fear when I look at the Christian fundamentalists in America and I think we could end up back in the Middle Ages, still with the same problems. But I suppose what we have now is a public arena which gives us a framework to discuss those things, and which doesn't always hold us up to ridicule because we think those personal problems are important."

Beatrice opens at the Traverse Theatre, Edinburgh on April 11.