

# Across the sea to Haworth

DOMINIC GRAY TALKS TO WRITER AND DIRECTOR DEBBIE SHEWELL ABOUT HER NEW WORK WITH FEMINIST THEATRE COMPANY, MONSTROUS REGIMENT.

Debbie Shewell is up to her ears in it. First she's in the middle of directing *Love Story of the Century*, Marta Tikkanen's story about a wife and mother dealing with a husband's alcoholism. That opens at the Riverside on February 21st, and is coming along nicely. On top of this Shewell is also writing and directing *More Than One Antoinette*, her own reworking of the *Jane Eyre* story. This is also shaping up pretty well, before the curtains open at the Young Vic in March. At least one of the reasons the projects can be kept going simultaneously is that both are with the same company, Monstrous Regiment.

"The Monsters" are currently celebrating 15 years in existence, and it's this anniversary excitement that is behind their current productivity. They promise "three new shows in which we will be applauding the diversity of women's lives" this year, and Debbie Shewell is at the core of the first two.

Although she's never directed for the company before, it makes sense for Debbie to be involved. For her the fact of being a woman working in the theatre over the past ten years means that she is keenly aware of the Monsters and their contributions to feminist theatre.

Beyond this there is a certain symmetry within her career so far, a circularity that is "bringing me back to base". She started off as founder of a small scale women's theatre company called "Little Women". Then, after years at the Soho Poly, Oxford Playhouse, and The Bush, she went abroad to work in Stockholm. What emerges is a diversity, from small scale to major institution, and from purely feminist theatre to theatre that is working within the so-called "mainstream". Debbie sees this pattern as similar to that of Monstrous Regiment itself, always on the look out for new areas to work in and explore the potential. She's coming back to base, but bringing an awful lot of experience and thinking with her.

Within the Monsters, continuity is important. The two actresses in *Love Story* were founding members of the company. But the other strand has always been to bring in outsiders, such as Debbie. Possibly the most important continuity has been in the production process. Debbie was not surprised to find that none of the company members "pulled rank", rather she said, "the collaborative process is absolutely central to all

their work. There are no hierarchies."

Shewell defines "feminist/women's theatre" as work "giving priority and importance to the exploration of women's experience." This doesn't mean that men can't be involved, or that it's possible to talk about women without at the same time talking about men.

Both plays are about relationships between the sexes. *Love Story* centres on the relationship between a wife and mother and her alcoholic husband. It is based on Marta Tikkanen's autobiographic story, and is adapted by Clare Venables.

"The strength," Shewell argues, "is that it is autobiographical. It is about one woman's life, without generalisations, yet it has a resonance that is recognisable to everybody."

The addiction to alcohol was not something that either writer or director thought could be told using a

straightforward naturalism. Both actresses play the same character, and in this way explore the shifting identity of women, and particularly of women in a state of crisis. "The dialogue is about the contradictions in behaviour and belief, that women find in themselves".

Shewell sees this as intersecting with current work in psychology, such as *Women Who Love Too Much*, but the piece goes beyond that into an exploration of the way women perceive the world. It's important to Shewell that the central character works through the questions of addiction and the problems of the marriage, and emerges strengthened by the ordeal.

The second play, which opens in March, is a version of the *Jane Eyre* story. I say 'version' as it isn't so much an adaptation as a complete reworking of the Bronte novel.

Shewell was deeply interested in the character of Antoinette, Mr Rochester's first wife, and the relationship of these two before insanity set in (which is basically where *Jane Eyre* starts). Shewell's major influence came from Jean Rhys' novel, *Wide Sargasso Sea* which explores that earlier relationship in depth.

"This group of characters and this set of relationships," says Debbie, "was a starting point. I didn't want to reproduce the novels, but to find new ideas, new stories, and new character interactions".

Shewell talks animatedly about new work in theatre, and comes across as somebody who both knows what she is doing and is venturing into new territory. But the thing about the Monsters is that the whole Regiment will be moving forward together. (See Fringe.)

Scene from *Monstrous Regiment* LOVE STORY OF THE CENTURY



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**M**rs Rochester is one of those characters whose grip on our imaginations seems obsessive. This week sees yet another reincarnation of her in **Monstrous Regiment's** **MORE THAN ONE ANTOINETTE** by director Debbie Shewell (Young Vic, 928 6363) which takes a fresh and intriguing look at women's definition of themselves and the construction of identity through an exploration of 'Jane Eyre' alongside the highly regarded Caribbean novel which was based on it by Jean Rhys, 'The Wide Sargasso Sea'. 'Jean Rhys' book had long been one of my favourites', says Shewell. 'Re-reading the original, I became fascinated with the relationship between the two stories, particularly the similarities between Jane and Antoinette (Joan Rhys' version of the first Mrs Rochester) though they came from different cultural

backgrounds and by the fact that, under different circumstances, there might have been more of a relationship between them. As it is, they meet only at the point where they're competing over a man'. Juxtaposing the original storyline against Mrs Rochester's early life and Rochester's first marriage, Shewell believes, places a quite different, even uncomfortable light on the woman locked in the attic upstairs. With a young, multi-racial cast and collaboration from Hesitate and Demonstrate's Geraldine Pilgrim, 'More than One Antoinette' promises to lift the veil on some dusty old assumptions and, alongside 'Love Story of the Century', should confirm that **Monstrous Regiment**, in these all too safe days, still retain a firm foothold in the forefront of progressive work.

CAROLE WODDIS

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# PRESS CUTTINGS

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MONSTROUS REGIMENT  
**MORE THAN ONE ANTOINETTE**  
WRITTEN & DIRECTED BY DEBBIE SHEWELL  
TUES 27 MARCH-SAT 14 APRIL at 7.45pm  
(PRESS NIGHT 27 MARCH 7.00pm, NO PERFORMANCE 13 APRIL)  
*The Young Vic Studio*  
66 THE CUT, LONDON SE1 BOX OFFICE 01-928 6363

122 TIME OUT MARCH 28-APRIL 4 1990

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