

Restructured colonialists

LJUBIMA WOODS
TALKS TO DIRECTOR
NONA SHEPPHARD
AND TRANSLATOR
GILLIAN HANNA
ABOUT SHIPWRECKS,
SEXISM AND MAKING
SAUSAGES.

For the past 15 years Monstrous Regiment has celebrated women's experiences with a theatre both artistic and political. It has tackled an array of feminist issues with panache and buoyancy through adaptations of European drama and through the work of gifted British writers such as Caryl Churchill, David Edgar, Rose Tremain and Bryony Lavery.

The company has been marking its anniversary with a season of three new plays, two of which – *Love Story Of The Century* by Maria Tikkanen and *More Than One Antoinette* by Debbie Shewell – were staged earlier this year. The final production in the season, *The Colony Comes A Cropper*, due to open at the Battersea Arts Centre on 7 November, is something of a curio. In an inspired coup of imagination, the company has taken Marivaux's one act play *The Colony* and teamed it up with a second act commissioned from somebody



Gillian Hanna

very interesting contrast in style because Robyn is very upfront, very anarchic and the writing is very bold," says Nona Shepphard who directed the plays. "The level of madness about her piece made me

"If we had done it 15 years ago, the second play would have been very different. We would have felt we had lots of answers. What's interesting now, 15 years on, is that there are certain things one feels very strongly

media stereotype of a man-hating woman. But as I get older I just see more and more that until men take responsibility for family life (whatever that may be) as much as women do, then the situation can't change. Be-

commissioned from somebody whose style could not be further away from Marivaux's formal eloquence, the talented Australian singer/writer Robyn Archer.

Interestingly enough, it was the Guardian's Michael Billington who brought *The Colony* to the attention of Monstrous Regiment a few years ago.

"He wrote a review of a play and started talking about *The Colony*, and at the end he said something like 'Where are you Monstrous Regiment?'. So we immediately rushed out and bought a copy of Marivaux's complete works," explains the actress and co-founder of the company, Gillian Hanna, who translated the play.

An initial version of *The Colony*, which deals with women's emancipation, was performed for the first time in 1729. It concerns a group of shipwrecked people on a desert island. The women decide to end the monopoly of male domination. The men, at first amused by the idea, grow angry and trick the women into defeat.

Robyn Archer uses a similar group of people marooned on an island some 250 years later. It soon becomes clear that little has changed over the centuries. There are strong links between the plays; the characters are brought up to date and the setting is the same. But what is interesting is the juxtaposition of the two. "It's a

madness about her piece made me think we are living in times which are quite strange and mad and as we run towards 2000, it seems to me to be getting more dangerous and extreme.

"I think what's interesting also is the language change because, and that's not to say that Robyn's language is poor, but the way we express ourselves now is very, sort of simple. And it strikes me that we've lost a lot of richness." (Education Secretary take note.)

Hanna agrees that we are no longer served by the subtle sensitivity of language, so apparent in Marivaux's writing.

"However angry his characters get, and they do get very cross, they never lose the ability to articulate in an absolutely clear and rational manner what they want and why they want it. Whereas today, people often fly off the handle and the controls seem to have gone."

It is Marivaux's language which presented Shepphard with her biggest difficulty. She says it was hard to find a sense of style which could accommodate his long, flowing sentences with their elegance and wit, yet exuded an energy and a truth, allowing the characters to mean the things they were saying within this formality.

Hanna points out that Archer's play offers no easy answers to Marivaux's sardonic debate on women's place in society.

certain things are held very strongly about, obviously, but the answers are not as simple as we thought they were."

Both Hanna and Shepphard are formidable women with strong characters and intoxicating feminist convictions. Hanna is particularly forward on the subject of the women's movement. She readily admits that feminism is "unfashionable" at the moment. But although she does not deny that advances have been made, she is most insistent that a lot still needs to change. "It's an area where women have to be eternally vigilant," chorus spontaneously Hanna and Shepphard, then burst into laughter.

"The more unfashionable feminism becomes, the more important it becomes to me to have to talk about it," continues Hanna. "Because otherwise, what will happen is exactly what's happened every time before when women stand up and start demanding what is rightfully theirs. There is a flush of enthusiasm, certainly a small amount gets done. The suffragettes got the vote, yes, fine, but what happened then? Everybody went back to sleep, we got forgotten. And then, when you wake up and realise how much you've lost in the interim, you have to start all over again, almost like re-inventing the wheel.

"I was never a separatist, I'm still not a separatist and I was never the

then the situation can't change. Because a woman goes out and does a job, but nine times out of 10 she comes home and still has to take the burden of running the home and bringing up the children."

Shepphard says that the extraordinary thing about Marivaux's 18th century work is that his arguments still stand and Hanna adds that "as you watch the play you can run through your little mental check list" of women's achievements. But she is indignant at the suggestion that a move towards more traditional female values may have cost the company a drop in potential audiences.

"You've got to put it in the context of the fact that overall, apart from major blockbusters or major box office attractions in the West End, audiences are dropping across the board and that is largely to do with the economic situation."

The recession and a squeeze on funding has undoubtedly taken its toll on the way the company operates. It now has just 2 full-time paid staff: an administrator and a chief executive, a title that makes them laugh a lot, says Hanna.

"That seems to be what we need to have; artistic directors are no longer considered important. It is chief executives now, the word 'artistic' has to be wiped out. We are no longer making art, we are making sausages." (See Fringe)

Meirion Bowen on the opening of the Birtwistle festival on the South Bank

Web of magic

THE South Bank Summerscope's Birtwistle Festival started with an enthralling music-theatre double bill, which will be repeated a few times in the next ten days and should not be missed.

Bow Down in the first half, originated as a collaboration between the composer and Tony Harrison at the National Theatre Studio. Here, it seemed nothing short of miraculous that such an intricate web of musical and histrionic activity, covering a vast range of expression, should have evolved from improvisation centred upon various versions of the Ballad Of The Two Sisters.

But then, everything by Birtwistle exudes a primal freshness. Bow Down started from simple drum beats, other percussive noises, vocal cries and vibrations. The subsequent

Michael Billington on the many felicities of Marivaux's *Infidelities* at the Lyric, Hammersmith

Bonds of love and power

MARIVAU, they tell us, is difficult to do in English. You can never quite capture that type of romantic banter known as "marivaudage." But William Gaskill in his new translation and production of *Infidelities* (La Double Inconstance) at the Lyric Hammersmith has a novel answer to the problem: he ignores it. He puts Marivaux into modern dress and slangy prose and the result, while not perfect, has a gutsy directness that reminds you of Mr Gaskill's work in rescuing early English eighteenth-century drama from epicene coyness.

My only reservation concerns aspects of the translation. Four-letter words jar oddly in Marivaux and Harlequin's despatch of superfluous servants with "On your way you load of shits" sticks out like the sorest of thumbs. A line like "Shut up, faintheart" also seems an odd mixture of old and new; and when Harlequin greets a lord in Beckettian dark glasses with "It's that man again," I half expected it to be followed by a rousing chorus of "Mr Tommy Handley is here."

But despite some verbal infelicities in *Infidelities*, Mr Gaskill allows us to see Marivaux's work for what it is: a sinewy, penetrating study of the incon-

stancy of love and the power of class. A Prince, legally bound to marry one of his subjects, has fallen in love with a country girl, Silvia, and had her kidnapped and brought to his court. She is followed thither by her true love, Harlequin. Silvia and Harlequin swear an undying bond of affection. We see that bond dishonoured as Silvia is wooed by the Prince in the guise of a cavalry-officer and Harlequin is seduced by the wiles of Flaminia, a manipulative sophisticate.

If the plot seems familiar to English audiences, it is because Anouilh used it as the basis for his cynical comedy, *The Rehearsal*. But Marivaux's mastery lies in his uncompromising psychological realism. He sees love not as a fixed entity but as something dependent on time and place: Harlequin may be the best bet in the country but at the court his charms begin to fade.

Fifty years before Beaumarchais, Marivaux also pierces the hypocrites of the master-servant relationship and the absurdities of plutocratic swank. There are some exhilarating passages where Harlequin, with that common-sense logic that is the source of true comedy, demolishes the notion of possessing two houses when you can only live in one, of equating honour, which



Comic reason: John Lynch as Harlequin is an inborn quality, with titles, which are an external gift.

I would call the play instinctively radical rather than truly revolutionary; and Mr Gaskill gets the point across by setting it in an artificial world of gleaming mirrors and sumptuous wooden panelling (fine designs by René Allio) into which John Lynch's Harlequin erupts like an Antrim boy let loose in Versailles. Mr Lynch's performance is excellent precisely because he communicates, in

his battered straw hat and dungarees, the comic hobbledohoy aspect of Harlequin while also appearing as the voice of reason and sanity: when he asks who will behave with truth and justice if the Prince himself does not, the question goes devastatingly unanswered.

I was less taken with Saskia Reeves as Silvia, partly because she is got up inexplicably as a Moldavian peasant in headscarf and bootees, and partly because she misses the essential quality of bruised innocence. But there is a peach of a performance from Eleanor Bron as a Flaminia who mocks affected simplicity with the waspishness of Bea Lillie, and very good ones from Tom Chadbon as a servant who shimmers into a room like Jeeves, and from David Rintoul as a Prince who has the polished sheen of a waxed automobile.

"The time is ripe for Marivaux in this country," declares Gaskill. I agree providing we can get away, as here, from dandy-mincing pretentiousness. I am just amazed that no-one has picked up *La Colonie* in which a group of women, among a party of French settlers on a remote island, demand equal rights and self-government. Monstrous Regiment where are you?

PRESS CUTTINGS

TAYLORS



BATTLE OF THE SEXES: Female shipwrecks on a desert island overturning male domination is the comic basis of *The Colony Comes A Cropper*, a play opening next week at Salisbury Playhouse with Irishwomen Nora Connolly and Angela Clerkin in the cast. Written in 1750 by Frenchman Marivaux, it has been translated and updated by Robyn Archer and opens on Wednesday of next week, September 19.

It runs at the Playhouse, Monday to Saturday at 7.45 p.m., with matinees on September 22, 29, and October 6, before moving to London for a run from November 7 to 25 at the Battersea Arts Centre.

Nora Connolly is a founder member of the London Irish Theatre Group and Angela Clerkin is well known for her work with The Hairy Marys dance troupe. Salisbury Playhouse is on 0722 20333. Pictured above are Nora Connolly, left, and Lynne Verral.

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In 1750 Marivaux wrote a stylish one-act comedy called 'The Colony', about the emancipation of women. In 1990 Monstrous Regiment commissioned Robyn Archer to write a contemporary second act. The result? From rococo to raucousness in one wild leap, with **THE COLONY COMES A CROPPER (BAC)** directed by Nona Shepphard. In Marivaux' original piece the women get tricked at the last minute by male cunning. And in Archer's sequel? Nona Shepphard's not letting on, but she does say that during Act Two certain modern ideas on politics, women, and

liberation come in for a timely bashing. She also admits that directing such a curious theatrical hybrid is 'difficult'. Marivaux' use of language is so formal, whilst Archer's style embraces 'a sort of danger and madness'. It is, she admits, 'like rehearsing two separate plays' — one 'elegant and witty', the other anarchy in action! The whole thing is set on a desert island, where a New World is in the making. Eighteenth century versus twentieth century notions of this new world might of course differ just a little. Grab a boat, set sail, find out. **BARNEY BARDSLEY**

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TAYLORS


MONSTROUS REGIMENT
IN COLLABORATION WITH
SALISBURY PLAYHOUSE
PRESENTS

THE COLONY COMES A CROPPER!

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TEETH...
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COMIC"
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THEATRE STAGES
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PLAYBILL

recommended shows

1. *Etta Jenks* (Fringe – Royal Court).
US playwright Marlane Meyer's disturbing insight into the sweaty, disease-ridden parlours of the sex industry, with Miranda Richardson as the skin flick star.
2. *Bajazet* (Fringe – Almeida).
Racine's tale of politics and passion in the seraglio stripped to the raw in Peter Eyre's eminently tasteful production.
3. *The Colony Comes A Cropper!* (Fringe – BAC).
Marivaux's comic depiction of the battle of the sexes but the battle lines are completely redrawn by Robyn Archer's rambustious second act.
4. *Theresa* (Fringe – The Garage).
Betrayal and intrigue in the Channel Islands – forget Bergerac, Julia Pascal's version is much better (See Openings and Previews).
5. *Dancing Attendance* (Fringe – The Bush).
When does a carer become a manipulator? A biting indictment of Britain today by Lucy Gannon.

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