THE INDEPENDENT

GALLERIES / ARTS

PICTURE CHOICE / Theatre director **Clare Venables** sees the sexes at war in Anthony Green's 1972 wedding portrait *Mr & Mrs Stanley Joscelyne*

"I first saw this work in Belfast when I was doing the *Magic Flute* there. It leapt off the wall at me. In fact, it made me laugh. But the more I looked at it, the more disturbing the image became. The laugh became a nervous giggle. That was two years ago. When I started to work on *Medea* recently, I needed something that expressed the same kind of dangerous oddity as the play, which takes something quite banal — a man and woman in their home who go through a bad patch — and ends in disaster. Both *Medea* and this picture play with a lot of things that are very funny in the relationship between the sexes. There is a lot in *Medea* about the problem of male-female relations in respect of the different demands we make on 'the home'. There is an unspoken tension between the couple in this painting, too. Home becomes both something you long for and a trap.

Looking at this painting is not like looking at a Michelangelo. It is something on a much more psychological level. I don't respond to it on the class level — the way the artist gets the ornaments just right, like in a play by Mike Leigh. It is the power of it that is meaningful in the same way as, say, a de Chirico. It is not an aesthetically beautiful painting in any classical sense — but it makes its point."

□ *Clare Venables's version of 'Medea' for the Monstrous Regiment Theatre Company is at the Lilian Baylis Theatre from 22 Jan to 15 Feb.*

Tuesday 21 January 1992

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THEATRE/Sue Norris

● The Monstrous Regiment has a new artistic director — and Claire Venables has marked her appointment with a new version of Euripides' Medea, which she also directs.

The work, which opens at the Lilian Baylis Theatre on Wednesday, is a modern version of the original Greek story of the woman jilted by her foreign husband who poisons her younger, wealthier rival and murders her own children. Pictured above is Sue Holland (the Chorus).

Venables puts the story into a white-walled, designer setting where the woman, beautiful and ambitious, is betrayed by her social-climbing politician husband.

Medea runs until February 15; performance time is 7.45pm. Bookings on 071-837 4104.

HAMPSTEAD + HIGHGATE EXPRESS 10TH JANUARY, 1991

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Time Out
January 22-29

THEATRE

Preview

Return to gender

ANN McFERRAN ON MONSTROUS REGIMENT

During the early '70s, an explosion of new talent produced numerous left-wing and experimental theatre companies. For most actresses, however, it was business as usual, competing for a tiny proportion of roles: 'Playing someone's mother, wife or lover — and that someone was always a man,' says Gillian Hanna.

During a summer storm in 1975, Hanna, Mary McCusker and Chris Bowler founded Monstrous Regiment, a co-operative with a simple artistic policy: to put women's experience centre stage.

Over the last 15 years, the history of 'Monsters' (as the company affectionately refers to itself) has reflected that of the women's movement itself, from its exhilarating first wave to the so-called 'post-feminist' '80s. After Monsters' highly successful début, the celebratory 'Scum', about the women in the Paris commune, the company commissioned plays which included: Caryl Churchill's 'Vinegar Tom', about witchcraft; the experimental 'Kiss and Kill', about domestic violence; and 'Floorshow', a feminist cabaret.

For over a decade the company toured exhaustively, experimenting with form, surviving the occasional flop, and winning enduring popularity with audiences throughout the country. But by the late '80s, Thatcherism had forced an exhausted company to face the political nightmare of feminism in retreat and the economic reality of cuts in the arts. For many, the continuing existence of Monstrous Regiment was more important than ever. Director Clare Venables: 'What characterised Monsters was their chutzpah, their refusal to be cowed as they looked at some of the appalling injustices being done to women. Like tragedy, their shows energised, because they had the guts to look those painful experiences in the face.'

Before the company's fifteenth birthday last year, MR decided on a dramatic change of policy and invited Clare Venables to become its artistic director. Her appointment is an attempt to create artistic virtue from financial necessity.

An articulate woman in her mid forties, Venables used to run one of the country's major theatres — the Sheffield Crucible. Until recently, she was the only woman to combine such a demanding role with motherhood. She is exceptional, even by Monsters' standards.

'Exceptional?' roars Venables. 'Most of the time I experience myself as a wreck! Remember, that superwoman label is incredibly isolating.' Directing her first play for the company, Euripides' 'Medea', Venables notes with relish a job description which 'requires me to think about being a woman, which I've done all my life, but it's been privatised.'

At first glance, the 2,500-year-old story of Medea, who poisons her husband's new wife and murders her own children, might seem an odd choice for a company famed for charting contemporary women's experience and commissioning new plays from women writers. For Venables, 'Medea' is a remarkable story which could have been written today. 'It is about how passion is perverted by the difference between the male and female place in society — how difficult it is to convert a love between unequals into equal love — and how we use our children as a battleground. What's important is how that struggle is played out in archetypal terms — literally over the bodies of the dead children. The only way Medea can reach Jason is through the children.'

'The extraordinary issue about why we hand on our tragedies to our children is not that we don't love our children, but that we don't know how to love gently.' Passionate love can mask lethal violence, and Venables is not exempt: 'I love my own 13-year-old son passionately, but I'm appalling to him occasionally. Luckily it doesn't take a physical form, but I can scream bananas at him. There's a gap between what we say and what we do, and that's the issue. It's not our fault, but it is our fault if we refuse to look at it.'

'Medea' is playing at the Lilian Baylis Theatre from January 22. See Fringe listings for details.

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22 JAN – 15 FEB · 7.45PM

EURIPIDES'

Medea

IN A NEW VERSION
BY CLARE VENABLES

MONSTROUS REGIMENT

Lilian Baylis Theatre
ARLINGTON WAY, EC1 (OFF ROSEBERY AVE)
BOX OFFICE 071 837 4104

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