



1976-1978 The Early Shows

This file contains an extract from Gillian Hanna's Introduction to *Monstrous Regiment: A Collective Celebration* (Nick Hern Books 1991).

The period covered by this extract, and its title, have a corresponding period and title in the website's History pages.

The Introduction provides an extensive historical account of the company. It also includes extracts from the recollections of people who had worked with Monstrous Regiment, and had been asked to contribute these for the book.

Apart from minor corrections to dates, and the addition of Arabic numerals to the pagination, the original text has been left unchanged. This includes the periodisation and headings used in the book, which differ from those in the website's History pages.

There is a separate Archive file that contains the complete Introduction and other editorial material.

We are very grateful to Nick Hern Books for their permission to reproduce this material.

Introduction © Gillian Hanna 1991.

.....

Scum: Death Destruction and Dirty Washing

From January to April 1976 we were more prosaically concerned with booking a tour and getting a show on the road.

The composition of the company had begun to reshape itself into its first public appearance: Claire Luckham and Chris Bond would still write *Scum*, although new commitments in Liverpool meant they couldn't be permanent members of the group; Susan Todd agreed to direct the play. She was the perfect choice. Not only did she have a great deal of directing experience in mainstream theatre, but she had been a member of the Women's Street Theatre Group, she had directed *Parade of Cats* at the Almost Free Women's Theatre Festival and she had been part of the Women's Company that came out of the Festival, directing Pam Gems' *Go West Young Woman* at the Roundhouse in 1974. Chris Bowler, Mary McCusker and I turned down all other work we were offered and took on the administration of the company and the organisation of the tour. Helen Glavin was already writing music and songs. We advertised for and found a stage manager, d. Wilson. Andrea Montag was designing the set. With Susan we auditioned actors: Roger Allam, not long graduated from the Theatre Arts Course at Manchester University, and Alan Hulse, who had been working with The General Will in Bradford.

'A musical celebration of the women of the Paris Commune written by Claire Luckham and C.G. Bond . . . "See Bismark do the can-can; watch a man wind himself through a mangle; savour the aroma of grilled elephant's trunk; thrill to the sound of 'Le Temps des Cerises' and a dozen more show-stopping songs; tremble before the final spectacle of Paris burning amidst a sea of blood." '

In our first press release we wanted to set the tone of what we were about: serious, but joyful. Later, we emphasised the serious a little more, in case people dismissed us as lightweight:

'On September 3rd 1870 a French army of 104,000 under Napoleon III surrendered to the Prussians at Sedan. This humiliation threw Paris into an uproar: Revolution, civil war and the eventual establishment of the Commune followed. It lasted only fifty-eight days, and ended with Paris ablaze, and an estimated 25,000 Communards dead. But although the Commune was destroyed, its example has always been important to Socialists: When Lenin died his body was draped in a red communard flag . . . for a brief two months Paris celebrated the Festival of the Oppressed. The sun shone as the scum of the earth sang and danced in the streets. Those who had been reduced to eating rats seized power and took the government of their lives into their own hands. In the very forefront of this revolution marched the Parisian women: exhorting, organising and demanding everything from creches to guns, defending the barricades to the last.'

At some point we stumbled across a book in the Thames & Hudson series, 'Documents of Revolution', *The Communards of Paris 1871*. Reprinted in it was a selection of pamphlets, articles, decrees and posters written by the Communards themselves. We were amazed to read that not only had the women of Paris shown incredible physical courage (confronting and disarming soldiers sent to remove 'the people's canons'; later on, actually fighting the French army sent in to regain control of the city for the French government) but they had formed women's political clubs to agitate for their demands. When we read the list of what they were agitating for – equal pay, provision of crèche facilities for working women, education for girls, equal opportunities for women – we could see that we had a lot in common with these women. We had the vote, to be sure, but it didn't seem to us that a great deal more had been achieved in a hundred years.

We didn't change the world – in lots of ways things are worse for women now than they were then. But I know Scum changed a lot of women's lives (maybe some men's too). Some people hated the shows – but they never failed to stimulate. That was because they were born out of the real and often painful experience and feelings of the company and their friends. It made life very raw at times and there were casualties. There were times when I felt miserable.

But I doubt if I could have found any other job which I could combine with the practicalities of being a single parent, which allowed me to build my work life around my personal and political preoccupations, gave me a solid grounding for my continued involvement in the arts and provided me with lasting and valued friendships.

SUE BEARDON
Administrator, 1976-1978.

How did the script emerge? Certainly not as we had originally planned it.

One of the questions that came up again and again in the 1970s was the breaking down of the division of labour and the consequent hierarchy of skills. Why should an actor be considered more important than a stage manager? Why should the writer be God? Wouldn't it be more democratic to write scripts collectively? If you were working in a collective, how could one voice represent the ideas of the whole? We acknowledged some truth in this, but there were some areas where we recognised it as bunk. Enough of us (and I was one of them) had been through the painful experience of writing shows collectively in other groups to know that the skill of playwriting was one skill we wanted to acknowledge. We also knew that women writers had to be found and nourished. In one of our grant applications we had stated:

'We want to take the emphasis off collective writing, not because we are opposed to it as such, but because there are painfully few women writers actively involved in theatre and we want to encourage them.'

We were looking for a collective relationship with the writer. As it turned out, there was no recipe for what that relationship might be, and each one of our ventures with writers - whether it ended happily or unhappily - was different from the others.

I love words. I respect the skill that uses them to present eternal truths and to share hard-won insights. But too often I find myself resenting and distrusting how words have been used to turn my/our

story into history - negating the process, the leapfrogging chaotic progress we made and are still making.

MARY McCUSKER

*Company Member, Performer 1975 to the present,
Executive Director, 1990-1991.*

Our original intention in commissioning Claire and Chris was to establish some kind of process whereby they would write and we would then discuss it with them. Or we would have discussions out of which they would go away and write. We were all reading and researching like mad. When they moved to Liverpool and consequently assumed the role of 'outside' writers, as opposed to being part of the group itself, that process was stretched in a way none of us had ever imagined. Claire took on the main burden of the writing - as Chris was trying to rescue a theatre (he had been appointed Artistic Director of the Everyman) - and travelled up and down to London to work with us as often as she could. Somehow, the thread between us never gathered the strength it should have had, and by the time we started rehearsals the company felt that parts of the script were still in an unresolved state.

The main structure of the play - written by Claire and Chris - the situation, the characters, most of the dialogue - was as we finally performed it. Mole and Madame Masson in all her horrendous glory jumped off the pages and onto the stage. Whatever wasn't working we thought we could sort out on the rehearsal floor. Which is what we did. Under Susan's direction, we improvised, we discussed, we argued, we went away and wrote scenes and bits of scenes. We also added more songs. It's almost impossible to say now who did what. Everything I wrote was thrown out as terrible. I think a lot of the scene in which they discover how much Masson had been exploiting them was Mary's. Everybody wrote something. Certainly as director, Susan shaped whatever we came up with and was the final arbiter of what worked and what didn't.

It's impossible to say how the play would have looked if Claire and Chris had been able to be at rehearsal all the time. When they were eventually able to see it on the road, they weren't at all happy with what we had done. Their view of what needed changing in the working script they had delivered to us was very different to ours. Looking back now, it seems to me inevitable

that we would change aspects of the play in rehearsal, simply because of 'where we were at'. We identified with those women. We felt we knew them. We were trying to recreate our world just as they had. An interview in *Time Out* quoted one of us during rehearsals: 'It's important to us that we create this atmosphere of celebration, this release from toil . . . and create the kind of debate that went on. That's why it's interesting to us now. Women talking about marriage, day nurseries, women's education, equal pay.'

We, the company, were going through an experience which the writers couldn't be part of through an accident of physical separation. Just as we felt we were shattering everything that had gone before, so it was bound to be that we would want to shape the material we were putting on the stage in the same way. Life imitating art. Or was it the other way round? It was both; and somewhere in the middle and muddle a collision was inevitable.

The play opened in Cardiff at the Chapter Arts in May 1976 and then toured for over a year; we revived it in 1978.

The script that is printed here is the script as we performed it, with two changes that Claire and Chris have made in Act 2.

Our recollection of the events surrounding the writing and rehearsal period of Scum is substantially different from Gillie's. We were commissioned to write a play, not a 'working script', and that was what we delivered. That play was fundamentally altered in two ways: firstly because there were fewer performers available than we had agreed to write for, which was understandable; and secondly because the company wanted, in our view, to romanticise the story we had written, which was not. They did so without any consultation whatsoever, hence our surprise and anger on going to see the show.

CLAIRE LUCKHAM & CHRIS BOND
 Authors: Scum: Death, Destruction
 and Dirty Washing

After the First Night

Where does the life of a theatre company truly begin? I suppose it doesn't really exist at all before it first appears in public, no matter how much work has gone into setting it up. So the founder members of the company in that sense are those who

opened *Scum: Death Destruction and Dirty Washing* in Cardiff: Roger Allam, Chris Bowler, David Bradford, Helen Glavin, Alan Hulse, Mary McCusker, Susan Todd, d. Wilson and myself. But it wasn't as simple as that. Claire and Chris had been but were no longer 'members' of the company. Andrea Montag and Hilary Lewis who did the set and costumes were totally involved, but in as free- lancers. Pat McCullough dropped out at a fairly late stage, so for the first tour Susan played Eugenie as well as directing the show. She also 'joined up' as a full time member rather than as a visiting director. Linda Broughton was definitely a member although she wasn't in the first tour of *Scum*.

Imagine being on an endless bus tour with a family of nine, all with behavioural problems and none willing to submit to parental control. And accommodation that alternated between B & Bs with a week's supply of poached eggs in the fridge, damp sheets and bath taps you had to pay for (the landlady kept them in a safe place) - and hospitality (provided by friends of the theatre) with all nine in one room sleeping on narrow strips of foam and beating off the hungry mice.

Add on the activity of flugging the set upstairs (you'd be surprised how often we did), converting an ill-lit corridor into a dressing room, and attempting to persuade the caretaker not to close the building half an hour before the show finishes - and you have an average day. The ideal venues, the good B & Bs and the hospitality that provided delightful rooms free were as few as feminists in the Conservative Party, and that made you cherish them all the more.

MARY McCUSKER

*Company Member, Performer, 1975 to the present,
Executive Director, 1990-1991.*

Over the next couple of years, one or two came and went, but by and large we were a fairly constant group. When the Gulbenkian Foundation gave us a year's salary for a full time administrator, Sue Beardon took over from David who had been looking after the office. She came to us from a background of working in the Labour movement, and her skills both organisational and creative contributed to the development of the company's work in a way

that went far beyond the title 'administrator'.

We wanted to build a repertoire, so that while we were touring one show we could be preparing another. Our original submission to the Arts Council in January 1976 had described our plans for the first year and a half. After *Scum* we wanted to do: 'a show. . . at present untitled, the subject will be "Witchcraft - subversion and madness". We began research last September, and we are talking to several (women) writers about collaborating with us.' Then, 'as a contrast to the first two [plays] which will be "historical" pieces, a modern show set in an industrial context. Women at work. Probably including a (by then) retrospective look at how the Equal Pay and Sex Discrimination Acts are working. We are aiming to interest women in the organised Labour movement in this one, and we will be looking to bodies within that movement for substantial support.'

The untitled show turned into *Vinegar Tom* which Caryl Churchill wrote for us to produce and tour in the Autumn of 1976. Pam Brighton was the guest director.

We had been introduced to Caryl (in Hyde Park, after a march, NAC (National Abortion Campaign), I think) and she talked about how in researching her English Civil War play *Light Shining in Buckinghamshire* for Joint Stock, she had come across a mass of material relating to women and witchcraft, and wanted to write a play about it. Her ideas fitted with ours, and we commissioned her to write it. In terms of our relationship with a writer, it was one of the happiest we ever had. There was never any disagreement about the basic argument of the play, although we had long discussions with Caryl about the characters Jack and Marjory, the couple who represented the emerging bourgeoisie. As I recall, their first scene was the only one which was substantially rewritten. Other changes Caryl made were largely practical. A scene in which Jack and another man drag the drowned corpse of the cunning woman through the village and dump it while they go and look for a drink had to be cut because it had to immediately precede the witchfinding scene and Roger didn't have time to change. The part of Betty had to be written in such a way that Josefina Cupido, who had just joined the company as a musician, and who had never acted before, could have a part that wouldn't be too terrifyingly long.

Scum and *Vinegar Tom* toured in repertoire through the end of 1976 and the spring of 1977. At the end of that year we produced a cabaret, *Floorshow*, and a play with music about domestic violence, *Kiss and Kill*.

At some point in 1976 d. Wilson had left and Meri Jenkins had taken over as technician/production/company manager. Over the next eight years Meri worked with the company, taking time out now and then to go and pursue other work, but she was a rock on which we all leaned. She had an uncanny skill of seeing a problem and dealing with it almost before the rest of us had noticed the problem existed. She also had the invaluable ability of hiding 'contingency money' in a production budget to stop us overspending on the sets.

I was 23, and a fledgling stage manager. In January, 1977 I joined Monsters as the Technical Stage Manager. I badly wanted the job. It was an awesome experience, taking care of everything for a group of people, majoritively women, who had more experience than I, who appeared that articulate, that committed, who worked so hard, and were so hugely talented.

The company was still touring Scum. A few weeks after I joined we went to the University of Sussex at the beginning of a twelve week tour. The theatre seats about 800. The control box is located at the back of the theatre - a kind of giant gold fish bowl. I was alone throughout the performance. In that situation, there are times when it is very difficult to feel connected to what is happening on stage, since the show is heard through a tinny intercom, and the performers are at some distance. I was just beginning to feel as though I had a handle on things - the show was becoming more familiar. At the end of the performance I went through the usual lighting and sound cues - blackout, hold five seconds, lights up to full for the curtain call, as the full company gathered on stage. I glanced up - to my sheer amazement, the audience had begun to stand. Not just the one or two as at other performances, but everyone there. The company stepped forward to applaud the audience, and as the applause echoed back at me, I had an intense feeling of exhilaration and mad joy at what was happening. I had no one to throw my arms around, so I danced around the gold fish bowl, alone.

MERI JENKINS
*Technical Stage Manager, Company Manager,
Different periods 1977-1985.*

Susan Bassnett,* in a paper she read at the British Theatre Conference in Rostock, Germany, in April 1978 noted that, 'with (*Floorshow*) the company has moved into new areas . . . traditionally, the music business and the compering of cabaret acts have been male dominated and consequently by entering the predominantly male preserve the company has been exploring new ground. The role of women in cabaret has been that of decoration or of servicing the male performers - hence the scantily dressed assistants in conjuring acts, the pretty girls in colourful costumes who assist comperes and quizmasters, the dancers whose routines serve as short interludes between the main (usually male) acts. That is not to say, of course, that there are no female comediennes, of course there are, but it is only when one sees Monstrous Regiment's *Floors how* with women compères, women comediennes, women drummers, women singers and the two men in very low-key positions that the extent of their innovation becomes apparent. In terms of the costume and design, the company have striven to escape the stereotype of the women in star-spangled bikinis, and the costumes are a kind of clown's overall, in brightly coloured satin, decorative but by no means sexist.'

Now that cabaret has become a cliché of the alternative theatre it doesn't seem like such an extraordinary thing to have done, but at the time we knew we were taking a leap in the dark. We were working with four writers - Caryl Churchill, Bryony Lavery, Michelene Wandor and David Bradford - and not one of us really knew what was going to work. We didn't even know if women could stand up in front of an audience, without a character, and be funny. So we wrestled endlessly over the problem of each woman finding her 'voice', and the difference between a performer's relationship to a 'persona' as opposed to a character.

A desire to discover if and how women could be funny; to explore as many genres of theatre as we could; to find out if there was such a thing as 'women's theatre' and was that any different from 'theatre', which was always implicitly male. We were searching and our theatrical curiosity pushed us into areas which were new to most of us. Nudged us as well into cabaret because of our good fortune in having three talented and accomplished musician/performers in the company. Roger was primarily an actor but had a wonderful trained tenor voice and could play a

* Susan Bassnett, Reader in Comparative Literature, University of Warwick.

mean piano and guitar; Helen was equally accomplished in either art, but was a skilled composer. She had written the music for both *Scum* and *Vinegar Tom*. Josefina was a percussionist, drummer and singer. Cabaret would give us a chance to let them shine. We wanted to show them off.

I was always being asked at that time and since, what it was like to work with a majority of women. I never quite knew what to say. In certain ways it was easier for me than other men who worked with the company. I wasn't exactly a blank sheet of paper, but I was only twenty-two, it was my first job, so I did not have any previous working experience to question or reject. I was not politically involved at university but it seemed natural to be a socialist. I suppose I had been vaguely and completely unthinkingly sympathetic to the idea of feminism at university (only in theory of course, not in practice), so being confronted with seven older, articulate women in a sense helped to form my thoughts in a more concrete way. I needed to embrace some beliefs, and here were ones that seemed natural, idealistic and, very importantly for me, rejecting of my parents' ones. I can certainly remember becoming tense and defensive in social situations with friends who might joke about it, or say 'cunt', or comment on women's bums. Not to say anything seemed a betrayal; and if I did say something I always did it clumsily and felt upset and embarrassed. But inside the group I felt supported and loved in a way that I am sure wouldn't have been available to me in a male group, as there was a playful atmosphere I felt at home in. To this day, when I meet Gillian, we are roughly aged twelve.

ROGER ALLAM

Company Member, Performer, Musician, 1976-1979.

Cabaret would also give us the opportunity to try and move out of the theatres and arts centres and into other spaces in pursuit of that new audience we were always in search of. Set design and fairly complicated lighting had meant we found it frustrating when we performed the plays in non-theatrical venues. Without the technical facilities which theatres gave us access to we always felt the shows weren't being seen at their best. We were depriving the audience of the whole experience. A cabaret, on the other

hand, would be more simple, designed to be flexible and play anywhere.

Kiss and Kill, written and directed by Susan Todd and Ann Mitchell, was an exploration of violence between men and women. Intended to be more experimental in form than anything we had previously done, it was almost a collage of short scenes exploring male violence, both domestic and 'public', and the relationship between the two. (One of the characters is a woman who has left her violent husband, but finds herself on the end of horrific abusive phone calls from him, another is an American living in London, a Vietnam veteran, who speaks graphically of the violence he saw and experienced in that war.) Musically, too, it was different from anything we had attempted before, in that it was largely improvised and therefore could change from night to night. Josefina sang, accompanied only by percussion.

We always thought it was an important play in the company's development, and were annoyed when people failed to recognise its experimental nature. Perhaps it was something to do with the subject matter - violence - that seemed to provoke violent reactions in the audiences. Love it or loathe it, it wasn't a piece that many people felt luke-warm about.

.....