



The Execution and the Collective

Extract from an interview of
Gillian Hanna [GH] and Mary McCusker [MM] conducted by Jessica Higgs
[JH] for *Unfinished Histories* with Katrina Duncan [KD] for *Monstrous
Regiment* on 25 May 2016

The topics discussed in this extract relate mainly to the 1980-1985 section
of the History pages on this website, titled **Adapting to the 80s**.

The extract is taken from a near-verbatim transcript of the interview
produced by First Class Secretarial Services, with some parenthetical
[additions] and {comments} by the editor. Text removed is indicated by a
series of

A digital recording of the interview, in two Parts, each lasting about 2
hours, is lodged with the Monstrous Regiment archive in the V&A's
Theatre and Performance Archives.

Copies of the recording are also available in other locations, including the
British Library Sound Archive. Further details at
<http://www.unfinishedhistories.com/interviews/viewing-interviews/>

Time intervals (in minutes) in the recording are indicated by [5.00], [10.00]
and so on in the text.

{Mary has been talking about various changes in the 1980s and their impact on how the company operated}

GH: As I recall, I mean please, put me right if I'm wrong, as I recall it was actually the Russian play that knocked the collective on the head.

MM: The Russian play was a big part of it. We had...

JH: Meaning?

MM: We thought we had a lot of income coming in. *The Execution* (1982).

JH: [*The Execution*].

GH: [*The Execution*].

MM: We thought we had a lot of income coming in from a foreign tour and it turned out there was no foreign tour.

GH: And it was our make or break, not that we put it like that or realised it...

JH: '82.

GH: ...to get back to the theatrical ethos of the company. In other words, a big show, politics, women, music, ta-da!

MM: Explosions.

GH: And it turned out to be a complete disaster, one of our least successful shows ever. The tour just fell to bits. At which point everybody who had come in to be in this show just buggered off. And it came back down to us {Mary and Gillie} as I recall.

MM: Even less in a way. It was quite a complex process, can I say, to give the writer {Melissa Murray} their due. There was a lot of stuff I liked about *The Execution*.

GH: Oh no, absolutely.

MM: I thought it had great strengths in it. But it was extremely long. Again, it was about the questions that you should've been throwing at the writer and answering yourself as well. And it shouldn't have been touring.

GH: No.

MM: It was a big show. It lasted three and a half hours nearly. If you're doing that touring, out of London, and people coming into smaller places from outside, people couldn't get back in time. The places we did it, there wasn't a bus would take anybody anywhere. Apart from it being quite complex and heavy and dark and Russian. And there were problems with it. There were definitely problems during the rehearsal.

We had a wonderful time at some points. I remember we did it {in rehearsal} in Russian gobbledygook for weeks. And it was Sue Dunderdale {who directed}, wasn't it?

GH: Yes.

MM: And it {the gobbledygook} was to release people. And the very funny thing happened also with the acting. I can still remember John Slade's gobbledygook was just so good. When we stopped doing gobbledygook there was a lot of the energy went out of it. And there wasn't...For me we were putting it on before the energy came back, that you transferred to this complex text. Yes, we knew what should be there, but suddenly you had the language. And it was long and you were taking it out... There was a load of stuff.

[60.00] But also, part of the falling apart was it was the one that was going to do a tour of Australia.

GH: Yes, it was.

MM: And the money for the company was depending on that.

GH: Yes.

MM: There was no money for anybody apart from the administrator after we finished that stretch.

GH: That's right, because we'd spent every penny on that show.

MM: It *looked* good.

GH: And we never made... The tour fell to bits so it never made... Also, I mean you might disagree with me on this, but I also think that *The Execution* was a very interesting *example* of the failures and gains, but in this instance ultimately failure, of the relationship between a collective of performers and a director who comes in to work with you. The fact is that we all knew it was too long for our purposes. Had we been given a six week [or] two month slot in the Cottesloe, fine. But for our purposes and our sort of touring we knew it was too long.

And there seemed to be no way... Because actually, although people say - I mean not everybody, but some people say - that we were difficult to deal with, my memory is that we nearly always gave in and said look, you're the director, you must do what you think best. And we didn't often, and in this case we should have...

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{They go on to talk about Angela Hopkins and *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes I and II*, and then return to the topic of the collective and power}

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MM: We tended *collectively* to sometimes, I think, decide we mustn't overpower people with our power.

GH: Yes, I think that's right.

MM: The power of the collective. We were never going to squash people the way we'd been squashed individually. But you're sending mixed messages. You're not

going... And I think that's the thing that we haven't talked about, the whole male-female thing, and power. And women and power. And [nowadays] I do quite a lot of mentoring, tutoring, with people going up for big grants, and I'm always saying to people, touch your power. And I think people's personal power is important.

I think in my youth within Monstrous Regiment I didn't know the difference between aggression and assertiveness and getting what you want, and indeed touching my power.

And I'll say very briefly I remember one point in Monstrous Regiment where I was locked in the van by the company because a venue - it was when we were touring the cabaret [*Floorshow* (1977-78)], and the venue, the person running it, after we had done the show, said he couldn't pay us. He could've told us before the show and we would... A friend of yours [Gillie's]. And I got very, very angry and wanted to go in and deal with this person. And the company decided I was so aggressive I was locked in the van.

And the others, the well-spoken others without this Glesga keelie {Glasgow low-life/troublemaker}, went in and dealt with this person. And I can remember my friend Gillie Hanna coming out and saying - they finally unlocked the van to let me out - saying, 'he's going through a bad time'. And I said, 'so he should be'.

GH: Who was it?

MM: I can't remember his name. It was a friend of yours.

GH: Who's he?

MM: But the main thing, what I'm saying is I know I am quick to anger, but therefore the cushion of the collective - 'let's be nice to people, let's not oppress'... And I think you can send mixed messages, and it's far better to confront, without my aggression, but to be clear about what it is you want. And that to me is one of the...

[70.00] It was nice to sit back sometimes and think well, I don't have to say the nasty thing, we'll come up collectively with something. But sometimes {she returns here to *The Execution*} it would've been better to say, yes...

GH: I think that's right.

MM: ...you *are* the director, but actually you are missing the point here. We have to go on the road touring this and we have to explain to the Arts Council why after three and a half hours there's no audience, or there's no audience for the next venue because venues have now heard it's three and a half hours and what have you.

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