



## Touring *Calamity*

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 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.

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- GH           ... We had almost bankrupted ourselves with *The Execution*. We had put so much into it. We had so little money left. I have a feeling, it may be wrong, but I have a feeling that you and I sat down..... and said look, we're going to have to bite the bullet. We're going to have to do a two woman show and tour it for ten million years - and it's got to be us - and exhaust ourselves. Because it's either that or the company will fold. And my memory is that's what we did.
- MM:         After *Fourth Wall* came *Calamity*.
- GH:         So we did. We employed one other person.
- MM:         Jane Cox.
- GH:         Jane Cox.
- MM:         Who had been in *The Execution*.
- GH:         Yes, good for Jane. She was the only one in *The Execution* who didn't run away, who didn't think we'd got bubonic plague. Good for her.
- MM:         But I mean I'll just say, there were a lot of good ideas came from you, I have to remind you. You had found the letters...
- GH:         Oh yes, I'd found her letters, Calamity Jane's letters.
- MM:         ... written by Calamity Jane's daughter to her mother.
- GH:         Yes.
- MM:         And thought it would be a great idea to do a show on Calamity Jane.
- GH:         Yes. Took it to Bryony.
- MM:         And Bryony Lavery was approached and...
- GH:         And we did wear ourselves into the ground. I remember one night, and I know exactly where we were. We were in Newcastle Polytechnic, and in the interval I was lying under the props table going, 'I can't go on. I can't go on. I've had it.' And Mary's going, 'Come on, this one's for Celia Johnson... come on, come on. Have a cup of coffee'.
- MM:         [60.00] I mean *Calamity* was great. It was an exhausting show. Andy Montag, another of the people who've worked with us quite a bit - and went on to run the Bristol Old Vic Theatre Design School - she designed a smashing set, but it was a big artificial grass plain, which weighed a ton. Three wagons, mine of which was the heaviest, which we had to pull - they were made from wood - pull around the stage. And then going 'yeah-hoo' {wildwest cry} sort of thing, as you.... I was playing a French woman and mass murderer.

It was a tiring show to set up. Just getting the floor down, you know what it's like trying to get a carpet down. And Gillie and I would pack the van because Gillie and I always packed the van together, because we worked very well packing the van.

GH: To you, Mary {mock-toasting}

MM: And unpacked the van together. And since there was only the two of us, and... One thing that you forget when you're saying we're only going to do a two-hander or a three-hander, is that if you let the person design the show, which would've been the same if there'd been eight people, is you've still only got three people to get it together. And because as actors we'd always felt you couldn't leave it to stage management, because you're exploiting them, that became, as you get older, even harder work.

And the reason you were lying under the table was [that] before the interval you had to fight the big bear. And because of course the big bear wasn't a real bear, naturally - we couldn't afford it and it would've been cruel anyway - but it meant you had to animate the bear and fight it as well. And you were absolutely knackered with that. And it was the same night you lost your gun or something.

And so at one point you were saying to me, {whispers} 'I haven't got a gun, you've got to give me your gun'. Because I had a little gun as well... And so I gave you my gun to do your bang-bang, shooting thing. So then when it came to the point where I was standing outside my wagon having...

GH: Give me the gun back! Give me the gun!

MM: ...with my gun to say 'I'm going to kill somebody', I had no gun. I had to go, 'with these hands, I kill.' Thinking, Gillie Hanna hasn't managed to get my bloody gun back to me.

But you were...

GH: Out of it.

MM: Because you just overdid it with your dance with the bear. It's one of those wonderful Bryony moments. Touring as an actor I was really glad I didn't have to do it, because hauling the thing around and... It was lovely. I loved it.

GH: I did learn to do a bit of rope work with that. And I used to go down to see a man called Alex Laredo. Alex Laredo, who lived in a semi-detached house in somewhere like Ewell. And so, I don't know how many sessions I'd had with him, one day... he said, you know, Gillian, you should think about doing this. And I went, what? He said, the rope. I said, really? He said oh, there's no good girl rope acts going around the clubs right now.

MM: I think that was a line that... Because I had to go to The Great Kovari to learn the card tricks. And The Great Kovari had the waxed moustache. And I had to go to his house where his wife, child and dogs all had to sit and watch me learn the tricks, till The Great Kovari thought I was up to doing the performance. And he'd had a shower, and it was very

unnerving doing my stuff to him with this unwaxed moustache hanging out his mouth.

And he said to me, he said, you know, this is a really good little act we're starting to work up. And I'm thinking, I can't think of anything...

GH: Oh, clearly it's a line they give you.

MM: Because you did the rope spinning and I did the...

GH: Yes, you did the magic tricks.

MM: ...card tricks.

GH: God. And I also have to say, that my wagon was the best present my nieces ever got.

MM: You got your wagon, you didn't...

GH: Well, they were all just going to be broken up and I thought... I took it back, Christmas...

MM: Lovely.

GH: ...and put it up in the dining room. It eventually went out and lived in the garden and then of course fell to bits. But while it lasted they loved it.

MM: Andy Montag was very good with wood.

JH: I was just surprised you didn't go on to do a production of *Mother Courage*, as you had {voices overlap} and the wagons.

MM: You're absolutely right. We could've had three Mother Courages with our wagons...

JH: Absolutely.

MM: ...going around the country.

GH: Exactly.