



The Shift to an Artistic Director

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 1990-1993 section
of the History pages on this website, titled **A New Beginning?**

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.

{Discussion turns to the company's relationship with the Arts Council in the early 1990s and the appointment of Clare Venables as artistic director}.

MM: ... the Arts Council weren't happy with us. And things were indeed a little bit shaky. And they were ready to cut us. And that's when I went in and did the nine month [period as] Executive Director. And did an awful lot of stuff that ticked some of the boxes [for the Arts Council] but also was actually things that we wanted to do, [such as] readings of plays. Tash Fairbanks was our writer in residence at that point. We did monthly play readings at the Drill Hall. Some actually pretty good scripts.

And I was looking for ways that we, as a mini management collective, could try to get stuff to a development stage, [so] that you had a pick of three that would [be produced] and pick one to go on tour. Rather than holding ourselves to [the] fortune of commissioning something {and then automatically touring it}.

.....

[40.00] But my memory was not that the Arts Council said we *had* to have an artistic director. They were keen that we actually up the money for our administrator, that we had an administrator who was even more qualified, more in that kind of managerial... not company manager...

KD: General manager.

MM: Yeah. But they were worried about our collective mode of working because the actual running of the company seemed to be falling between the stones. And my memory was that *we decided* that indeed we should go the artistic director route. And I thought Clare [Venables] would be very good. We advertised, we interviewed people and she was the person we went for.

..... {Mary talks about various links they had had with Clare Venables as artistic director of the Sheffield Crucible Theatre}.

So she was there, and she'd directed me in *Beatrice* (1989), she'd been associated with us for *Love Story of the Century* (1990). There was a relationship there and indeed she came in as artistic director.

I don't think what *I* had definitely foreseen, as a performer, and part of the board... When we talk about 'the board', it was an *artistic* board. In my mind, we might have been, legally, 'board members', but we were [also] an artistic collective that made artistic decisions, and 'board' was a formal term that satisfied legalities and the ACGB. And I suppose naively I imagined there'd be a way that would work with Clare, where there would still be an *artistic* collective meeting, [although] we would still have these *board* meetings to satisfy the legality. But of course, if you've got somebody as an artistic director they have [their own] artistic vision.

So the plans the Arts Council had agreed, that I drew up at that time {as Executive Director, prior to Clare Venables' appointment in 1991}, with co-productions lined up with Notting Hill Gate, never went through {i.e. they were not implemented}. Clare wasn't interested in that, and I could quite understand why. But those were also the plans the Arts Council had agreed to and agreed to funding.

But Clare had a programme of work, which we agreed with, and gave her her head, which started with *Medea* (1991). To fast forward, without going through that stuff, Clare eventually was more with the feeling that she'd like to change the name of the company, and that she didn't want to tour. Who likes touring all the time? And we had tried before to negotiate with the Arts Council that maybe we could do more in London and something like these seasons where you do... something that was popular at the time, where you'd do semi-rehearsed, not whole-set productions of stuff, that you got people in, made a little bit of money from it, and from that you'd maybe take something that toured. Everybody was trying to survive.

But Clare had decided she wanted more of an artistic 'Arts Lab' kind of atmosphere where stuff was developed, and not tour. And it was when she eventually put those plans [to the Arts Council], after there'd been *Medea*, and the cabaret [*I've Got Nothing to Wear*], and a few experimental things done in the studio that we had then moved to as well... And it was the Arts Council who turned down those plans that made Clare decide to leave.

Now, Clare is now sadly dead as well, and I would say I had smashing times working with her as a director. I thought she was great. I found it difficult to work with her as part of what had been our collective. I hadn't foreseen what that would feel like. I hadn't foreseen what it would feel like as a performer not to be wanted in something you'd started. And I did actually end up having to take over a part in *Medea* when it did London, at very short notice, without the rehearsal, which is no joy as a performer.

But I thought she was a smashing director. I thought it was a gritty relationship that we had, where we were trying to learn to be what she wanted us to be, which was strictly a board. Which was par for the course you might say.

But it was Clare's decision to leave because the Arts Council turned down her plans, not that we either got rid of her or thwarted her in any way.

[45.00] And her words were 'I am a winner not a loser', and she saw that as a losing situation..... I thought it was a bit unrealistic, everything that she wanted. It was like jumping from nothing to there. And I think she possibly underestimated where life was going, thinking she had run the *Crucible* and the Arts Council would give her more leeway for what it was she wanted to do. Whereas we all know...

GH: It works the other way around.

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{They go on to discuss a disagreement with Clare Venables about employing a male stage manager for the tour of a show she directed for the company}

GH:the first point of contact for a touring company is the stage manager or technical person, and if that is a man that alters entirely how they see you. That person *has* to be a woman, it has to be.

I mean not if you're another {sort of company}... but if you're a women's company that's been going for how many years. And she simply couldn't see it. And at that point I thought, we're screwed, because if she can't see that, what else can't she see, or won't she see? And I mean as I said I had nothing...I liked her a lot, I worked with her, and I thought she did an absolutely miraculous job at Sheffield, she did a really great job at Sheffield.

..... And what amazed me about all of it was she never put up a counterargument as to why it should be a man. She just couldn't understand why we thought it had to be a woman. I think I'm right about that.

MM: But that's surprising when you look at Clare's document for the women's arts lab, which was very much based...

GH: Yes, I mean extraordinary.

MM: I know, but I think that's... People have blind spots and contradictions. I mean for us, the female technician... If you think when we started there was one woman who did lighting in the whole of Britain. Female technicians of any kind, female stage managers were practically below the radar. And when we would tour everybody assumed that either Roger [Allam] was the director or he was the stage manager.

GH: They would go to Roger because he was the tallest bloke...

MM: I mean it's another one of the ripples {distant effects}, isn't it? By the time even we were about nine years down the road, there were other women, lighting designers, there were more women actually approaching... And now if you go around theatres it's nearly all women. It's an extraordinary shift in how you do it. And for us that thing was one of the things we were very clear about.

I mean we had a male administrator for some time. We didn't say there are no men within the company. But we had experience in our lives of the fact there were very few female technicians, and it was the area we were prepared to take women in who didn't even necessarily know everything they had to know, to nurture them, so there would be more people...

So that {the disagreement with Clare Venables} was a thing that obviously had stunned us. Because when you don't know... You have it in personal relationships, don't you? You think you're on the same page with somebody and they say something and you think oh my god, I've misunderstood you for ten years, how could this happen?

And it was a small thing but a big thing that you recount to somebody... You think okay, so you've had men in the company in the past. What is the problem? But for us it was a bit of a sacred area if you like...

GH: [55.00] And in a way, I also blame myself because I never really took her on over it. I mean we had a spirited discussion at this meeting, but there's a bit of me which thinks we should've said no, you can't do this.

But of course because we were always trying to accommodate whoever came in, and personally, being a complete coward, especially in this instance, because I was wanting her to duff up the Arts Council for us, I in a very, very cowardly way accepted the trade-off. And I regret that now.

KD: The benefit of hindsight.

GH: Oh absolutely, 20:20 vision hindsight.

KD: Yeah.

GH: No, absolutely.

KD: But that thing about it's only on reflection that you see certain characteristics, i.e. as a group of mainly women, always feeling you wanted to listen to and accommodate the views of others, that to me seems a strong thread in what the company's history has been.

GH: I think that's true.

KD: And I think that it was interesting, Mary, I read an interview done several years ago where you were saying, 'On reflection...', you were looking back at how men had been involved at the start. It had never been a separatist company, but as men left and were not naturally replaced in the collective, you began to feel quite differently about the importance of being a women's company and speaking for ourselves as women.

GH: Yes, I mean like so much of what we've been talking about today, so much of it, we didn't have a programme. We reacted to things that happened in the way that we thought best...

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