



Music in the Early Shows

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 1976-1978 section
of the History pages on this website, titled **The Early Shows**.

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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JH: [75.00] I'm wondering whether we can..... go back to some of the artistic aims. I'm interested in the position of music, because that was very clear at the start, that you actively wanted music involved. Can you speak a little bit about that and how it was used? Very often you had performer musicians. And why you thought music was such an important component to the work.

GH: Do you know, I don't remember. it just always was, music was always going to be a huge part of it. And I don't remember where that came from.

MM: Well, I remember you saying we just don't want some - I think you said fiddle faff or something like that - for scene changes. You were very clear that it wasn't going to be a company that slapped on a bit of music to accommodate you shifting a table from A to Z. That music was to be part of our theatrical vocabulary.

And to make that happen in the right way we wanted musicians to be part of the collective. Which meant when someone like Josefina [Cupido] came in, I mean it's in the book *{Monstrous Regiment 1991}* that Caryl [Churchill] wrote the part [in *Vinegar Tom*] specially for Josefina, because Josefina hadn't acted much at that point. And we wanted the music to be woven into the fabric of the plays.

And we were lucky that the writers and the subject matter of both [the first two] plays seemed to encourage that. With *Scum* they were sometimes part of the action, like the songs on the barricade, and music from the time. With *Vinegar Tom* we went very definitely against the historical thing. {The songs were modern not historical} I mean I would throw off my old lady's stuff and have my satin shirt on to go on and sing 'Give me back my body'. I so loved it, because it was this wonderful release as an actor.

And part of looking now at archives and stuff is, there are websites with people talking about the *Vinegar Tom* songs, how they should be done. And discussions about them. Some people use different music, because *Vinegar Tom* gets done quite a bit. And it was a totally different thing.

What I will say is, at the end of *Scum* the cast sang together on stage. 'All you hear on the streets now...' {starts singing 'The Week of Blood'} Yes, I remember. And we sang at the end of *Vinegar Tom* as well. And because we then went into cabaret *{Floorshow (1977-78)}* it didn't seem such a loss that we didn't all sing a big song together at the end of a show. But it faded then, because it wouldn't have been appropriate in *Kiss and Kill (1977-8)* to have everybody... But it was wonderful to have shows where that was something - regardless of the part you'd been playing, you came together.

I realise now that might have been slightly Brechtian, my dears. But that we, as performer[s], but [also] human beings, were standing on stage looking at the audience, singing... And that went, in *Kiss and Kill*, and in *Teendreams (1978)*, which was another different kind of excursion, but had music. [That show was] written by a man {David Edgar, with Sue Todd}.

One thing I want to say just quickly is... What you said about being part of a wave - it was being recognised by an audience, almost like you touched a button in audiences. And I think the music seemed to be part of that as well, that it seemed absolutely right for that moment.

I mean I can remember when we did *Scum* and a woman saying to me, 'I never knew *that* many women could be entertaining'. I think she meant that many women *talking*, because let's face it, you can put the Tiller Girls on stage, it doesn't mean it's a feminist collective. But you know... And she was giving a compliment - 'I didn't know that many women could be entertaining'. I'm thinking, why not?

And I think the music just fitted in with those shows terribly well. I think we always wanted the music, but [later on] we lost the musicians being an integral part of it, or [it became] something that the writers didn't feel.

GH: But then in the interim, or not in the interim but before we lost the musicians, we had the cabarets.

MM: Yes, oh yeah, the cabarets {*Floorshow*, and *Time Gentlemen Please* (1978)}. And we still had music in *Kiss and Kill*.

GH: Yes.

MM: I listened [recently] to a tape of some of our music and I didn't recognise some of it because it sounded so professional! I mean that sounds ridiculous, but you're on stage doing it, you don't have sound equipment like musicians do to hear what it's going to be... And I thought god, that sounds good.

[80.00] No, we still had the live music but it was... Obviously with *Floorshow* that was... It was my dream come true, to stand singing at a mic. God, isn't it great to be one of Monstrous Regiment, I'm going to sing at Crystal Palace and I think...

JH: I think in those early days it was very specific, the integration of music - different to say Belt and Braces, who had a *band*.

MM: Yes, absolutely.

GH: Yes.

JH: And that you wanted to make the music part of the action.

GH: Yes.

MM: I mean I will say one thing I took for granted {i.e. didn't realise} was how long it takes to compose something. Helen [Glavin] would go away and come up with sometimes lyrics and sometimes music and come back with it. But I would kind of take it for granted {that this could easily be done}. And now I've [recently] been working with musicians more, I think god, I can see why at one point she'd said 'I need to have more time for composing'. And because Helen hated touring so much... She was a musician in her heart and soul. I've been talking to her again recently, and that was what sat with her.

And I remember the first time we did the cabarets. I forget what we were doing...it was *Floorshow* and Helen was at her keyboard, and that was... We'd finished the song and I was the MC and that, so I was doing... And I'd gone to my Glaswegian roots so I'd feel secure coping with hecklers. And out the corner of my eye I could see Helen get up and leave the stage. And I'm thinking, where's Helen going? Where's Helen going? And then about three minutes later she came back with a cardigan on. And it was obvious she'd felt a bit cold.

GH: She was just cold.

MM: And we were doing a cabaret. So Helen reverted to being... I mean she wouldn't have done that if it had been one of the *plays*. 'I'll just go and get a cardigan on'. But in this day, as musicians do, you see them - 'I'm not playing this bit, I'll go off, I'll adjust my mic, I'll do this'. And I still remember it, it's in my brain, this pink fluffy cardigan she came back on with.

But for them [musicians] of course that was their home ground. For me that was one that made me shaky, singing. Gillie's great with music, she's no qualms. I loved it when I sang with you because you were always on key and I could just, if I just listened well...

GH: Oh, just open your mouth and belt it.

JH: Anything else you want to say about music? Obviously Helen and Josefina [Cupido] were...

GH: I think to some extent... I'm thinking about it now. To some extent we didn't, as I recall, sit down and say right, we want this kind of music in this show, so we need to make sure we've got musicians who play X, Y and Z. My memory is it always worked the other way around. Who's in the company? What can they play? That's what we'll use.

So we used Helen... Well, Helen was a composer obviously. And I can remember...

MM: Roger [Allam] played guitar..... That sounds like a title for a show, doesn't it?

GH: Roger played guitar, piano and had the most wonderful voice.

MM: Didn't he?

GH: Obviously Josefina played drums and guitar. And I remember - did it ever happen - at one point we were talking about a show, because her background had been flamenco, at one point we... Dolores Ibarruri!

MM: Aah.

GH: We were going to do a play about Dolores Ibarruri, *La Pasionaria*, the heroine of the Spanish civil war. And Josefina, because of her background - I mean actually her background with flamenco - was going to do a lot of flamenco guitar and flamenco songs. And it would've been wonderful, it would've been authentic.

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