



## Press Cuttings 1975-1980

The items in this file come from material in the company's archive in the V&A's Theatre and Performance Archives.

Quite often, the press cuttings in the archive are photocopies of poor quality, and/or do not include full information about the writer, publication or date. The following list includes 'best guesses' about these.

Ann McFerran & Mandy Merck	<i>Time Out</i>	May 76
Sue Beardon	[unknown]	May/June 76
David Bradford	<i>Plays and Players</i>	March 77
Jane Warner	<i>Islington Gazette</i>	Oct 77
Hilary Wilce	[unknown]	March 78
Laurence Staig	[Manchester]	March 78
Eamonn Butler	[Adam Smith Institute]	1979
George Ann Chidgey	<i>Artful Reporter</i>	Dec 79

# The Women React

TIME OUT

7 May 1976



Enter stage left: two touring theatre companies who aim to bring women's experience into the limelight. Ann McFerran and Mandy Merck talk to the Monstrous Regiment and the Women's Theatre Group on the eve of their performances in the ICA's Socialist Theatre Season.

Ten days before their show is due to open, the most recently formed women's theatre group are rehearsing a 12 hour day in a church hall in Kentish Town. With the name that makes the male-dominated theatre companies ask "Who? What?", Monstrous Regiment are rallying round their first script. Washing lines draped with frilly petticoats hang between iron pillars and props baskets spill high-button shoes. With smocks or long skirts over their blue jeans to simulate nineteenth-century working clothes, the company are rehearsing a show set in a Parisian laundry in 1871.

## 'Scum' Victory

'Scum: Death, Destruction and Dirty Washing' explores the struggles of that period. In 1871, after the defeat of the French army by the Prussians and the collapse of Napoleon III's Second Empire, the city of Paris rose up to declare its independence and elect a government—the Commune—of its own. With the rich in flight and a new system of proportional representation in operation, the result was an overwhelming victory for the 'Scum', the Parisian proletariat. For 72 days, the Commune fought against the National Government at Versailles, instituting a number of legal and educational reforms, including the licensing of trade unions and workers' co-operatives to take over firms and factories abandoned by their owners.

Women's oppression was given special consideration, both by the official Commune Commission, which began plans for girls' schools and day nurseries, and by the women's political clubs. Working-class women became leading defenders of the besieged city. 'Men are cowardly bastards,' declared Citizeness Marianne on May 4, 1871. 'We will defend the city ourselves. We have petroleum and we have hatchets and strong hearts. Women of Paris—to the barricades!'

Most important, perhaps, was the social experiment of these 72 days. In what Lenin was later to describe as a 'festival of the oppressed', the Parisians argued, debated, and laid plans for a just society in the spring sunshine. 'It's important to us,' a member of the company says, '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.'

Against this background, the Regiment enact the story of a group of Parisian laundresses abandoned by their employer. Late one afternoon they put an important scene to the acid test. The scene, showing how they have to learn politics in order to survive, is crucial. The director crouches and pulls on a cigarette as she watches the company rehearse. Madame Masson has fled to Versailles abandoning the laundry. Her starving employees, realising that washing is the only way that they can earn money, contemplate running the laundry themselves. Mole, the wily old trooper (she was around in '48) produces Masson's accounts ledger and led by Lucy (who can read, the women pore over it. 20 francs for wages... 20 francs for wood and soap... but she's made 80 francs a week and that's a round profit of 40 francs. 'It's not possible!'

Appalled at the profit—'We knew she was bleeding us, but not that much'—the women decide to start again, doing the books and dividing the profits between them. They will write to the Central Committee of the Commune requesting a contract from 'a particularly dirty battalion'.

But the company feels that something is wrong. 'We must listen to each other,' urges Sue Todd. 'We're acting and talking in a vacuum. It's the old meetings lesson. We must be more aware and sensitive to what each of us is saying.'

## Bouncing Ideas

And so, sitting on the floor in a ring, the actresses improvise, listening carefully and bouncing ideas off one another. Now the conversation starts to change. Instead of the problems of running the laundry, ownership and property becomes the dominant issue. 'Look at how much she made out of us,' challenges one actress. 'This scene is really to do with the theory of surplus value,' comments another. 'Back to the drawing board,' sighs the director.

The group take their name from a pamphlet written by John Knox, the sixteenth century Calvinist misogynist: 'The First Blast Of The Trumpet Against The Monstrous Regiment Of Women'. They total 14, not all of whom are, in fact, women. Roger Allam, C G Bond, Chris Bowler, David Bradford, Alan Hulse, Gillian Hanna, Helen Glavin, Hilary Lewis, Claire Luckham, Mary

McCusker, Pat McCullough, Andrea Montag, Sue Todd and D Wilson come from theatre groups as vintage and as varied as Belt and Braces, 7.84, Incubus, Combination, General Will, Foco Novo, the theatre establishment of the RSC and well trod Northern companies like Bolton Octagon and the Liverpool Everyman.

MR eschew the stylised agit-prop of the political companies that many of their members have worked with previously: 'We want people to judge us on the show.' But it's 'a feminist company in the sense that all the work that we do and will do contains an analysis of society and an analysis of women's oppression'. A member will remind you that there are no more woman directors in this country than there were 20 years ago ('I've done about 20 productions now,' an actor calculates, 'and this is the first time I've ever worked with a woman director.') And plays in which the experience of women is central are notoriously rare.

## Fruitful Areas

But unlike other women's theatre groups, they do have men. 'Why not? We like them!' cries one woman. 'It was a very early decision,' recalls another more seriously, 'that it would have more women than men in it at all times. We thought that there were a couple of all-women's groups around, and the sort of work they're doing is very valuable. But we've been able to discuss violence between men and women, relationships, the differences in male and female sexuality—areas that have been very fruitful, though often very difficult to talk about.'

It's certainly a learning situation for the company's two actors. One of them attests to the rapid ascent his consciousness has made in its new minority role: 'In the groups I've worked in it's always happened that maybe there's two women and six men, so the chaps will go off to the boozier. And the blokes will sit around and actually weigh the two women up, in that very sexual way. "Which one do you fancy?" "She'll be all right for Sheffield".'

But the Regiment's actors are not subjected to a token male treatment. 'When I was running another company,' one recalls, 'and there were four blokes interviewing a woman, we'd never dream of actually talking about how she felt in that situation, or how maybe she should go away and think how she would feel working in a male-dominated set-up. But when I came here to an interview it was something that we were all aware of. We could sit down

without really knowing each other and discuss the possibility that the men might become token.'

And so, as the members of the Regiment challenge the structures of British theatre, they reflect on the subject of their play. The Commune died, with some twenty thousands of its members, when the French army burst through the barricades and retook the city. But it had already declared its intention to 'end the system of commercial exploitation of theatres and replace it as rapidly as possible by a system of co-operative associations'. 'It's interesting,' a member of the company observes, 'we're using historical events and yet so many of the questions we're still asking and so many of the demands we're still making.'

## 'Gonna Marry Ron'

*'You're leaving school. You're leaving school.'*

*Do bear in mind this golden rule: A woman by birth, be a lady by choice. A mother's words are the nation's voice. Let us walk with our menfolk into the new dawn.'*

*'Well I'm gonna marry Ron.'*

*'They're leaving school.'*

*'They're leaving school.'*

*They'd better think twice about that golden rule.*

*If you're a woman by birth, you've got no choice.*

*You're only a lady if you have a Rolls Royce.*

*I'll be cleaning these floors long after they're gone.'*

*'Well, I'm gonna marry Ron.'*

'Work to Role', explains a member of the Women's Theatre Group, 'is specifically designed and written for a school-leaving audience. What it means to be a woman worker is not raised in schools any more than contraception and abortion.'

'I got a job in a secondary school,' says another member of the company, 'and it has been incredibly useful. Talking to kids and being with them. The research gave us characters and dress and modes of speech that could be immediately identified. It's a question of exploring the audience and exploring the things we know and the things we don't know about the people in the play.'

## High Demand

WTG always create their plays for specific audiences. 'We'd never do a play about secretaries for a studio theatre.' The infrequent gig at the Bush or Oval serves as a launching pad for schools, colleges, conferences, pensioners' groups, and youth clubs. Demand for their work is high—partly because it enters problem areas where the authorities fear to tread: 'My feeling is that the abortion and contraception play ("My Mother Said I Never Should") was so heavily booked—even though teacher

Cor



● Above: a scene from the Monstrous Regiment Theatre Company's production of 'Scum, Death, Destruction and Dirty Washing' which charts the involvement of women laundry workers and two young men in the Paris Commune of 1871.

Roger Perry

# Theatre shows that come to you

AT THE recent Trades Union Congress in Brighton the first major discussion on the arts for fifteen years took place, following the publication of the TUC working party's report. The message of that report is the need for the trade union movement to extend its cultural activities and support the variety of groups whose work has developed in response to the needs and campaigns of the trade union movement.

The prime example of this has been the proliferation over recent years of small touring theatre groups, many of high professional standards, playing in working men's clubs and community theatres.

Support for the arts, and particularly these groups which represent trade union points of view, is essential at this time when cut-backs are creeping into every area of our lives. A fully satisfying leisure is as important for unions to fight for as good conditions at work, and yet how many ordinary people can afford theatre or the pictures these days? The proportion of the population who are theatre goers is frighteningly low.

It was in response to this that the small theatre groups grew up,

Sue Beardon, a member of the Monstrous Regiment Theatre Company writes about the many new theatre groups which aim at bringing their performances direct to the public.

trying to provide cheaper entertainment, but with more to it than entertainment. Entertainment is not just about escapism, it must also relate to real life with its joys and its problems. It must be relevant. So much of what is called "culture" is felt by the majority of people not to be.

This is why so many of these new groups deal with issues of the day, not necessarily in a moralising, dry way, but with music, humour and all the tricks of the theatre trade. Why should working people have a form of theatre less glossy than in the West End?

But each group is different. For instance, many groups now, in response to the growth of the movement for women's equality, have tried to address themselves to these specific problems. The Red Ladder theatre company have appeared at a London and Home Counties Area Weekend school with a performance on this subject. The 7.84 group have branched out to look at problems of agricultural life, while other community groups do smaller scale shows in pubs and other public places, where the emphasis is on showmanship rather than message.

On women's questions, two groups recently performed plays at the Institute of Contemporary Arts on this theme. The Women's Theatre Group performed "Work to Role", a play about the con-

ditions women face, at home and at work, while Monstrous Regiment Theatre Company took a different aspect, looking at the way women played a role in the events of the Paris Commune in 1871.

So you see, there is a great deal of variety, and it all needs support from you. We know Arts Council cuts will be large, and we know it's this side of theatre which will suffer the greatest hardships.

SO NEXT time your Branch or trades council has a social function, why not think of booking a theatre group? Addresses can be obtained from the Association of Community Theatres and from the Independent Theatre Council, both of which can be contacted via ICA, 12, The Mall, SW1.

Information about the Monstrous Regiment Theatre Co. can be obtained from 59, Camden Square, NW1, who besides their play about the Paris Commune, "Scum, Death, Destruction and Dirty Washing", also do a play about witches, and why they were persecuted, called "Vinegar Tom" and for future presentation they are planning a club show around the theme of women's work over 100 years of struggling for equal pay.

# green room

## David Bradford: reasons for absence and other matters

Peter Hall commented last year in *P&P* (May 1976): 'The theatre is not doing enough to encourage young directors. This is partly because in the period from 1968 to 1973 the young directors who were emerging turned their backs on the institutionalised theatre, or went into television.' I was an assistant director at the Royal Court for part of this period and did indeed turn my back on 'institutionalised theatre' to run a Community Theatre in Liverpool consisting of seven teenage Scousers supported by what is nowadays called a Job Creation Scheme. We dodged around the less likely corners of Liverpool 8, trying, unsuccessfully, to keep out of trouble, with a large wooden barrow (stolen), some props (mostly stolen), and some costumes from the Everyman Theatre wardrobe (mostly returned). Such entertainment as we provided was sporadic and of an unusual character. The scheme was, I suppose, opportunistic, and an example of the worst sort of tokenism—doing something about a few of the unemployed as an excuse for doing nothing about unemployment. Although for those kids it was better than scuffling about on the dole, for the time it lasted.

Just after I left the Court a meeting was called of all the directors and staff to discuss the future of the theatre. At one point someone referred to it as a democratic meeting, to which one of the directors—I think it was Lindsay Anderson—replied that it was no such thing because they, the directors, employed everyone else—the staff. Mr Anderson's rejoinder, if indeed it was he, strikes me as being unduly formalistic. In fact new ideas were appearing about structures, organisations and relationships in the theatre which were bound to force themselves on everyone's attention, and deserved discussion. It was about that time that Oscar Lewenstein, who was then running the Court, brought the Theatre du Soleil to the Roundhouse. The work of this company represented a decisive break with the type of European drama which the Court had introduced into its repertoire. The differences were very far reaching—in method, organisation, and, above all, in sense of purpose.

Within a year of this incident nearly all the directors, associate and assistant directors then working at the Court had left. Some went into television, or the West End and some into 'non-institutionalised theatre'. For example, William Gaskill founded Joint Stock Theatre Company, from which basis he has put

into the Theatre Upstairs some of the best work to be seen there in the last couple of years.

I think critics should bear this in mind when considering recent upheavals at the Court. Some of them have given the last two directors, Nicholas Wright and Robert Kidd, a battering; but the fact is that the Court had 'lost its way' as one of them put it, years ago, and it's no good blaming the present directors, or setting up a cry of 'Where are the shows of yesteryear?', or appealing for a New Deliverer. The only sensible comment I have heard on this subject so far was made by John Osborne, who said in a radio interview that an Artistic Director can only put on the best plays that come his or her way, and if the supply of good plays, English and European, has thinned out, explanations have to be sought elsewhere than in the theatre.

The radical changes in the relationship between actors and writers and directors in companies like the Theatre du Soleil, Joint Stock and all our non-institutionalised theatres implies a challenge to received ideas about democracy and property; and the close and creative participatory relationship which a company like Red Ladder establishes with its audience at all stages of its work is an indication that neglected audiences—90 per cent of the population—are not to be regarded as potential recipients of a wider distribution of 'culture', but as people who will change and recreate culture as a consequence of their developing command over it and their self expression. This process of change Brecht called 'stealing'.

Some critics tend to cry down what they call didactic theatre, assuming that the sense of purpose about a particular production is derived from an intention on the part of the writer, director or company, to 'change society' by the force of their 'message'. This view of art is instrumental, and essentially magical, and I don't believe it is one to which the companies thus charged would subscribe. Art changes perception. Changes in social relations flow from these changed perceptions. Art, entertainment, is an act of imagination. The repetition of prescriptive statements which attempt to influence people and change things is a kind of magic formula. It is a multi-million pound industry and you get three minutes of it every quarter of an hour on ITV. It's not altogether surprising that dispossessed artists unable to command a fraction of its resources should sometimes uncon-

sciously adopt its techniques.

At a recent press conference, an Arts Council official, asked for his views on the democratisation of the Arts Council, replied that he thought this impossible since the Arts Council had no constituency. The deliberate cynicism of this remark seems to indicate his need to restrict the meaning of democracy to its representative parliamentary version, effected through the ballot box. This is a battle which the extreme right wing in Equity is at last beginning to lose. A different view can be found in the TUC Report on the Arts, published last year. This is a sensible, clear and encouraging document from which it is evident that the process of discussion, criticism, and sharing of experience which shapes the work of those companies willing to work in conjunction with the labour movement is well appreciated. The fact that Concert Secretaries of clubs in some areas will now book a performance of a play for their members on the same basis as any other entertainment is a consequence of this.

My first Green Room was the one in the Theatre Royal at Lincoln. It had a sewage pipe running down one wall, connecting the upstairs lavatory to the main drain. You could find yourself sitting next to it, listening for a cue above the roar of its faecal traffic whistling down inches from your ear. The theatre also had Dickensian gas lighting, and a Dickensian gas-light lighter—a man of benign countenance who would take three-quarters of an hour to go round of an evening, his measured tread unvaried. His presence before a show was calming if a bit ghostly. The theatre had a serious problem with declining audiences which called into question the Arts Council subsidy—not that it amounted to all that much. I don't know how far anyone went into the reasons for this at the time—there is always the assumption that it is to do with declining standards or the wrong choice of plays. People leave, are sacked; new policies are tried; the hoariest old farces are dug out and the latest West End slickery paraded. But none of it works. Of course, a Provincial two-weekly rep is different from the Royal Court, but in both cases there are connections between the theatre and the social context in which it is operating. What happened at Lincoln was simply that, during the period when I was working there on and off, the city's two largest engineering works closed very substantial parts of their plant. The industrial labour force was devastated. There

were strikes, marches, protests, a protracted campaign of resistance. All to no avail. The slow decline of the town, which had been going on since the war, now rapidly accelerated. Although those people directly affected were not the theatre's regular audiences, I believe it would be wrong to think there is no connection between these events and the fate of the theatre.

After my sojourn in Liverpool I went into Theatre-in-Education. TIE pre-dated the 'fringe', but it has the character of non-institutionalised theatre to some extent; certainly a lot of people who did go in for it were conscious of the necessity to find new ways of bringing theatre and communities into relation. The thing about TIE is that you do it in the daytime. The organising principle is quite simply that you go out in the morning, visit two schools, buy an evening paper and go home. Of course, there is more to it than that, but it makes you feel 'ordinary' keeping 'normal' hours; and because the work is in schools part of the education process, it's more readily seen as 'work'. Identification with the community inevitably develops in different ways. There is feedback from teachers, and the relation with the 'audience' is often a personal one in which you learn individual names and bits and pieces of family background. They are also much longer-term jobs than actors get in rep. Consequently, attitudes can differ quite considerably. Leeds, Glasgow, Exeter, Bolton, Coventry have all been the scene of tension between a TIE group and the repertory theatre of which it formed a part. It seems that a company of noted excellence—the Bolton TIE team—may now disappear because there is no means of funding it as an independent (non-institutionalised) company.

Last December I went to a school in Holloway, London, to see The Cockpit TIE Company perform their adaptation of Arthur Miller's *A View From the Bridge*. It was interesting to watch the audience watching the play; to see how every new development was followed with close attention. Because the size of the audience was, as is usual in TIE, kept deliberately fairly small, the atmosphere was calm, and there was a considered and reflective quality about the response. It seemed to me that the clarity of the performance was less a technical skill (although the performances were skilful), but a consequence of the company's involvement in the ideas, issues, the basic content of the play—which has a specific quality in TIE because of the follow-up afterwards when the play is discussed, investigated and 'used' by the cast and audience in certain ways.

The discussion on this particular morning reviewed the action of the play from the point of view of four of the characters. It could be thought of as an investigation of what had caused the death of Eddie Carboni and how it might have been avoided. In fact, it achieved something



David Bradford assisted Pam Brighton and William Gaskill on Harold Mueller's *Big Wolf* in happier days (1972) at the Royal Court; the play was initially performed by schoolchildren in the Theatre Upstairs, later transferring with a professional cast to the main stage. Above, Michael Grady and Michael Kitchen in the professional production Photograph: John Haynes

that Brecht wanted his theatre to be, but which his own plays, by themselves, unsupported by the critical attitudes which are fundamental to TIE, can't. Nor should it be supposed that the audience thought they were watching 'life': they were well aware that it was a play, written by someone with a specific view. But the company's adaptation, which combined narration with 'acting out', reduced the subjectivity of the original to some extent, and the presentation 'supported the artificiality of the medium' (to quote Peter Hall again) so that the play was treated as a model which could be used to examine important and interesting questions.

It seems extraordinary that such a company should have to expend so much energy resisting attempts to close them down—which, I believe, has been the case in the past. And that if this were to happen, it would not receive a fraction of the attention given to the difficulties of other more institutionalised theatres. Obviously the sense of purpose which informs the work of a small group has to be achieved rather differently in a large theatre company, but I believe it is something which deserves to be given careful thought.

A final example. The Monstrous Regiment Theatre Company was set up last year on the basis of a very simple manifesto—or principle. That is, that the com-

pany should never contain more men than women. In fact it has so far always consisted of a majority of women, and probably always will. A consequence of this is that whether they write their own plays or ask writers to write for them, a fundamentally new way of looking at things, a new perception, is implicit in their work. By December and January they were turning people away from full houses in no less than three London theatres. Their preceding tour had taken them to Warwick, where an actor from the RSC came to see the performance. After the show he observed to a friend in the company that there was obviously no possibility of any corpsing, trick playing and fooling, to which actors in other situations are too frequently reduced. There was a qualitative difference in the performances. It must be the case that everything, every moment is for the audience in a specific and committed way.

Taken as a whole, the 'fringe' theatre doesn't enjoy a greater ratio of successes to failures than the 'institutionalised theatre'. However, there are good reasons for thinking that its achievements past and future, give it a place, not on the 'fringe' of an establishment, but at the centre of the nation's culture. The institutionalised theatre cannot turn its back on the lessons to be learned from it.





# FRIDAY'S WOMAN

*Edited by  
Jane  
Warner*

## *A dramatic blow at monstrous sexism ...*

**Drugs  
your  
kids  
mistake  
for  
sweets**

EACH YEAR 25 children die from eating medicines and household cleaners, many more have to be rushed to hospital.

Most parents know that to a young child there's not much difference between the appearance of medicine and sweets and they try to be careful, but it's impossible to watch children all the time, and the best way is not to have any unnecessary medicines in the house.



to have any unnecessary medicines in the house.

Now there's a chance to dump all unwanted medicines, household cleaners and chemicals safely.

Thames Regional Health Authority has launched the London Dump campaign (Dispose of Unused Medicine and Pills) and anyone can just take anything they are worried about to any chemist, and the local authority will dispose of them without danger to anyone.

The campaign has had great success so far. Lethal doses of cyanide — in one case enough to kill over 200 people — were among the first hauls

## MEMBERS of Monstrous Regiment, performing "Scum" an entertainment about the women of the Paris Commune in 1871.

BEFORE you stifle a yawn at the mention of yet another feminist group, and start to complain about "the monstrous regiment of women" take a look at a different Monstrous Regiment.

They're a co-operative theatre group based in Clerkenwell and making a highly-respected name for themselves in theatrical circles.

The members, who come from a great variety of theatrical backgrounds, got together a couple of years ago

in the hope of putting on the sort of productions they wanted — with challenging and interesting parts for women — and it's succeeding very well.

The plays try to highlight women's roles in history and the present day, questioning the belief that women have played a submissive part in historic events, and finding situations in which they have acted heroically.

Their first production was "Scum" a musical celebration of women in the Paris Commune in 1871.

The play shows the development of women laundry workers and their gradual involvement in the commune.

But the group is interested in entertaining their audiences as well as passing on a message, and they try to integrate music and songs into the plays.

For example "Vinegar Tom," a play about witches in the 17th century, has contemporary music to strengthen the image of women as scapegoats both then and now.

Their new shows, which

they're rehearsing now, are "Kiss and Kill," which looks at domestic violence and how it erupts, and "Floorshow," a cabaret about women and work.

The group, made up of nine women and two men, works from a house in Goswell Road, Clerkenwell.

Administrator Sue Beardon keeps things going, and holds the fort while the others are on tour.

"We are very lucky to be able to keep going as we do when so many actors are out of work," she said.

"We all contribute ideas and discuss where we'll perform and what plays we want to do. That would never happen in traditional theatre."

"Up till now we've only performed plays specifically written for us. But if we come across any of the classics with a lot of meaty roles for women we like to try them.

"Most of us are in our late 20s and early 30s, which is good really because it means we're old enough to have had plenty of theatrical experience and young enough to be interested in new ideas.

"Our members come from traditional theatre, fringe groups, repertory, and even the Royal Shakespeare Company.

"We're small enough now to remain co-operative and friendly, and if we increase it'll only be by a few more members.

"If we've got any ambitions I suppose one of them would be to have a permanent base — a small theatre where we could get to know local people and get some sort of feedback.

"We all think touring is important though, because it's nice to visit parts of the country where people wouldn't normally see fringe theatre like us.

"Audiences have been very responsive and interested and I think we've been lucky."

If you would like to see Monstrous Regiment in action, "Kiss and Kill" is starting at the Roundhouse Downstairs from December 5 to 10, and "Floorshow" will be at Oval House from December 1 to 3, and Hampstead Town



eminist theatre is thriving. It pops up at  
olytechnics, in pubs, at youth clubs and  
ion meetings. It bats about the country in  
id vans, bringing a message that is  
ometimes funny, sometimes aggressive,  
most always challenging.

players are ladies (and sometimes gents)  
th masses of conviction and vitality. Many  
ave formal drama training behind them but  
ey have turned their backs on traditional  
atrical ambitions, preferring to sink their  
nsiderable energies into work that mirrors  
eir beliefs about women and their need to  
uggle for liberation. On stage, they raise  
ritical issues and portray women in a  
riety of roles outside the usual stage  
ereotypes. Off stage, they do their own  
ything, assemble their own sets, wire up  
eir own equipment and endlessly thrash out  
oblems about what they are doing and  
by.

eminist theatre is political theatre and, as  
ch, responds continually to changing  
ssures. Groups often write their own  
lpts, basing them around issues of the  
oment—from abortion to domestic  
olence, contraception to equal pay. They  
pand, change direction or split up and  
orm as they think fit.

and down the country, small groups of  
omen activists get together from time to  
me to give their campaigning a dramatic  
ee. In Sheffield, Nottingham, Norwich,  
astings, Newcastle-under-Lyme . . . women  
ed amateur companies and taken  
e seats or the boards to put over their  
essage. The more formal, full-time  
mpanies are almost all London-based and  
ive as best they can on small national  
d regional arts grants.

oes without saying that everyone in these  
mpanies is overworked and underpaid but  
e compensation is a life of total  
olvement where colleagues become friends  
d work becomes a pleasure. As for the  
ark itself—well, like all fringe theatres, it  
lies from the self-conscious and mediocre  
he moving and thought-provoking. But  
haps the very best advertisement for  
minist ideals and convictions is not to be  
und in the shows but in the enthusiasm and  
ommitment of those who perform them.

# ANOTHER STAGE OF LIBERATION

Forget about traditional theatrical ambitions . . . star dressing-rooms . . . the acclaim of West End audiences . . . Nowadays, women are taking to the stage in a new way, shouting their message loud and clear.

Feature/Hilary Wilce. Photos/Albert Gayol. Photo of Pirate Jenny/Chris Davies



Polytechnic. This time they were doing a  
mainly musical cabaret, based around the  
theme of women's work, which in just a  
couple of hours did a total demolition job on  
the hoary old myths about women not being  
able to tell jokes and women's libbers having  
no sense of humour.

But such things do not happen by chance.  
Between all eleven of them (average age is  
twenty-nine), they have notched up a hefty  
amount of repertory and fringe theatre  
experience. They have Helen Glavin, who is  
composer and the company's musical  
director, and Josefina Cupido, who has the  
most stunning and extraordinary singing  
voice. The group also has Susan Todd, who  
is an experienced director, Sue Beardon, an  
experienced arts administrator, and Meri  
Jenkins, who handles production and  
electronics.

Monstrous Regiment has its own home base  
—a couple of bare floors above a shop just  
near Smithfield Market. It was there I went  
to see the group one morning. Everyone  
talked with enormous enthusiasm about

where the company had come from and  
where it was going.

It all started back in the summer of '75  
when Gillian Hannah, who was working  
with the radical fringe company Belt And  
Craves, noticed how many good women were  
applying for the one vacant position in the  
company. She rang some of them up and  
they waded through an untimely flood to  
meet together in North London. Right away,  
they say, it was apparent there was an awful  
lot of work they would like to do together.  
Apart from anything else, there were all  
kinds of subjects they wanted to do plays  
about which simply couldn't be tackled  
within established companies because the  
male/female balance was always wrong.  
The group's first two shows exhumed  
fragments of women's vast hidden history.  
One was about a group of laundry workers in  
Paris at the time of the Paris Commune in  
1871; another dealt with the treatment of  
witches in 17th-century England.  
Almost from the start, professional writers  
were commissioned to write plays for the

## MONSTROUS REGIMENT

is group (named, of course, after John  
ox's pamphlet 'The First Blast Of The  
umpet Against The Monstrous Regiment  
Women') is probably the best organised  
e-equipped feminist company working in  
ain today.

ent to see members of the company at a  
h East London arts centre, performing a  
plex, uncomfortable play about domestic  
lence. Because they were so good I went  
see them again at the North London



company—playwrights such as Caryl Churchill and Michelene Wandor—which has probably done more than any other company to help establish a whole new genre of women dramatists.

From the first, too, the members knew they did not want either the ideological or practical limitations of being an all-female company. Roger Allam joined them straight from Manchester University, bringing with him a formidable range of musical skills. Actor Clive Russell came along later, joining the group, "because it was simply the best political theatre group around". As yet he has not come across the kind of reaction Roger now knows so well—the friends who take him aside and say, "Come on then (nudge, nudge, wink, wink). You can tell us," or "What's it really like working with all those birds . . . ?"

The company members play up and down the country, piling the sets into a van and bouncing along behind in a hired minibus. They play in theatres and community halls, at universities and factories and they've done a stint in Holland. On the road, everyone shares practical tasks, rotating them when people get fed up.

"We're literally together twenty-four hours a day, sharing beds, living in grotty bed and breakfasts," said Chris Bowler, one of the group's original members. "It can be an awful strain and most companies on tour tend to split up and only get together for the hour in the evening. But we seem to spend most of our time together. We get a kind of strength from the fact we share beliefs about what we're doing. It's not that we don't fight, it's just that we seem to have the freedom to be able to argue and know it's not the end of the world."

Some of the more radical members of the Women's Movement criticise them for having men in the company but they reject the criticism, acutely aware of the dangers of isolation and insularity. In fact, they say, they'd like another man but they can't afford one at the moment. They can hardly afford anything since their small quarterly-in-advance grant barely covers essentials. However they don't seem to mind being poor as long as the work keeps getting better. They want to stay fresh, they say, to keep on rethinking what they are doing. Meanwhile, it never does to underestimate the sheer impact of women getting up on stage, playing instruments, telling jokes, taking leading parts . . . simply getting on and doing it.

## PIRATE JENNY TEAM TWO

A six-strong company, this is relatively new to the feminist stage, having kicked off early in 1977 with a very fast, very savage

satire on anti-abortion attitudes.

It all came about because two old school friends, Melissa Murray and Eileen Fairweather, went down to the pub one night and got "blind, roaring drunk". They went home, started clowning about, put it all down on a tape and realised they had the nucleus of a play. They got together with other interested women, raised a small Arts Council grant and the satire *Bouncing Back* was soon playing to women's and student groups up and down the country.

I saw it performed one lunchtime at Kilburn Polytechnic where the students were so stirred by the issues it highlighted that they decided to start their own National Abortion Campaign group. Later I talked to the three players, Melissa, along with Judy Watson and Jean Hart, over tea and cake just before they did another performance for workers sitting-in in protest at the closure of a West London hospital.

Judy joined the group from The Haringey Theatre Group, while Jean moved across from the Women's Theatre Group. ("They had to pay a transfer fee.") Melissa had never been on stage before *Bouncing Back*. She was, she said with some embarrassment, really a poet. Not one of them showed any sign of pre-performance nerves due, said

Melissa, to "the tremendously supportive situation we work in".

"Everything about the group is supportive, far more so than any mixed theatre group," said Jean. "We were discussing rehearsal schedules the other day and someone immediately said to me, 'Don't worry, I'll look after the children'. I'm quite a bit older than the others but it doesn't matter at all. Women share so many of the same experiences that things like age aren't important."

"We have this amazing director called S Dunderdale," said Melissa. "She is somehow able to be in control without being assertive so we seem to end up being self-directed. I don't know how she does it but I'm sure only a feminist could work like that."

The group is based in a West London flat but travels widely about the country.

"Everywhere we go, people look after us, feed us, put us up," said Melissa. "There is such a strong network of women's groups around the country now—general groups at National Abortion Campaign groups and refuges for battered wives. . . . Even in country areas like Devon and Cornwall groups are springing up."

"And because we go from place to place we can pass on information about what is



development of their work from the early part-time days when, they recall with much noisy embarrassment, they once actually danced across a stage waving bits of gauze, singing *When You Wish Upon A Star!* Now they put long hours into researching and writing their shows. When they were working on the theme of women's work, Clair went out and took a job as a hot-panted waitress just to see what it was like. When they were writing their show about an equal pay strike, they went along to talk to the women on the picket lines.

"We like to feel we project and show different sides of women," said Clair. "We also want to show people that women can organise and get things done for themselves. We want to get people thinking about the issues that concern women today."

Between them they have a fair amount of theatrical experience and pool their talents to teach each other new skills. Three of the group's members have been in the group since it started, while the four new members have come from varied backgrounds—theatre in education, community theatre, fringe theatre and mime training in Paris. Diane, who studied music at Leeds University and plays piano, flute and guitar, is one of the new recruits and is delighted to be a part of the group.

"I went to one of the shows about nine months ago. There were about ten people in the audience. I sat there laughing loudly and feeling like anything. Afterwards I ran backstage and said, 'You've got to let me in', and later I went along for a chat. Politically, I'm the least educated but I'm just beginning to know what all the different



initials mean; just beginning to feel a bit intelligent! I think I always have been a feminist, although I didn't know that was what it was called before. When I joined the group everything began to make sense." "Obviously, there are political differences within the group," said Julia, "but we're all feminists and all socialists—in fact, I've never heard of a capitalist feminist. I don't think they exist. We're all in Equity, we share

the same sort of interests so we see quite a lot of each other. It isn't a prerequisite of the group that we're all bosom friends, but it would be hard to be arch enemies and still work together."

"Really," said Clair, "this has to be the most perfect way of working. Sometimes I wish I had been through all the bad scenes with work just so I could enjoy this more fully." □

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# Cutting Up Men — to Music

Two women's theatre groups visit Manchester this month with two very different approaches. Monstrous Regiment's "Scum" is described as a musical celebration of the women of the Paris Commune and is set among women laundry workers. Here Laurence Staig talks to Sue Beardon about the problems of feminist theatre and its aims. Below, Tricia Hardwick looks at Pirate Jenny's new show which is based on the controversial events at William Tyndale School.

*Why did you call yourself Monstrous Regiment?*

The name comes from John Knox, who in the 16th century wrote a pamphlet directed against Mary Queen of Scots and Mary Queen of England "Trumpet Against this Monstrous Regiment of Women". We were looking for something which we felt summed up our policy which was to redress the balance towards women — it seemed like a good name.

*How did the group form, was it from an obvious necessity?*

There were a number of factors which came together. One of our company Gillian Hanna was working with the Belts and Braces Theatre group.

Another woman was required in the show so they held an audition at which all excellent. Gillian asked them if they were interested in forming the project.

At that time, we intended to have a women's theatre group working within the "Belts and Braces" umbrella, but due to some disagreement Gillian resigned and formed this group with the help of an Arts Council touring grant.

*Do you see yourself as an educative group?*

We think all theatre is a form of education. There isn't really any theatre which is neutral. We want to provoke and challenge — make people think more deeply about themselves. We believe people should control their own lives and culture.

*In view of the type of theatre that you present, do you prefer certain venues? Don't you think that theatre even in a fringe, is still a rather elitist entertainment?*

We are not as convinced as some other "political" groups about this, I think theatre is certainly educational. If we really were completely concerned with reaching the working classes then we would use the telly, but we're committed to theatre and that's where we come from. We want to do the job within theatre.

We would like to perform within the sphere of working men's clubs and trade unions, but the problem is that they haven't got the money or venues. We have done a couple of working men's clubs which went down pretty well, we have performed for trade union schools and they went down a bomb. What people are impressed by is that we don't talk down, we want to go anywhere including "prestige

than women. I think there are several groups that have taken women's liberation to heart and want to do more plays about this, but I think there's more going on than just what a play seems to say. I think that the image of one woman in a world of men says something about women's position.

Many people have said when we first got started, that they were amazed to see that many women active on the stage. Just that sort of impact. I still feel it is important to show our view. We are after an equal stance by trying to redress the balance. All our plays show women in active roles, decisive and controlling.

Both of our male actors feel differently about their position in the group. Roger Allan, who was with us from the beginning came from Drama School, very young and from a generation tuned to women being in an equal position.

The other, Clive Russell, is much older, married with two kids. He has worked with all sorts of groups and mainly with men in the past. Recently, he said that his relationships outside the group have changed as a result of working with us. I think we have a profound affect upon him — he has a lot more to challenge.

*And in the future?*

We've been invited to Cuba in the summer with "Scum" for the Youth Festival. There are also going to be seminars. Then we hope to come in August for a holiday.

One gets the distinct impression that the Monstrous Regiment, true to their military title are tightly organised, thorough, precise and positively united in their position. Sue Beardon also says that the company is looking for more male members.

Regimental in strength, maybe, monstrous — no!



# Subsidising the drama of politics

Many of the theatre groups which the Arts Council, local authorities and other government organisations help out call themselves "socialist" quite openly.

The use of the term usually implies a revolutionary stance that is well to the Left of most Labour Party members, so many of these groups are not to be taken lightly. They use public subsidy to put on shows hostile to the British political process.

One socialist group is the **Belt and Braces Roadshow Company Limited**. Over the last four years it was given grants and guarantees totalling £177,000 from the Arts Council and £3,900 from the Scottish Arts Council. In the British Alternative Theatre Directory, essential bedtime reading for waste watchers, they say their aim is "to present entertainment that is articulate and socialist, that is to say, created from the viewpoint of working and progressive people who look for socialist culture of all kinds". They also note that the smallest place they have performed in was a "Labour club committee room". But things are looking up for them. They have now come to Wyndham's Theatre, in the West End of London, with the political farce *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*.

Another socialist unit is **Cast**, which claims to be a "collective socialist theatre group". Its productions have included "the US labour classic" *Waiting for Lefty*; *Killer on the Loose*, which sees a woman worker leading a shop floor revolt over health and safety standards; and *Confessions of a Socialist*, an "imaginative and progressive stab at society": all for £23,480 last year.

**Cast** presented *Waiting for Lefty* in conjunction with **North West Spanner**. I have never seen this group describe itself as socialist, but it is rather excessively con-

cerned with challenging "the contradictions of the urban environment of the 80s". In the Alternative Theatre Directory, it is listed as "a gang under the wing of a charity", and it performs largely to shop-floor workers, industrial students and others in "the focal point of the community — the workplace". **North West Spanner** has received Arts Council grants and guarantees totalling £43,750 between 1976 and 1979.

**Counteract Theatre Group** is much smaller — its Arts Council subsidies in the last two years have been a mere £9,945 — but again, its aims are "to produce socialist, campaign-based theatre". It performs usually to trade unions, trades councils, students, and so on. Its programme is even more bizarre than **Cast**, **Spanner** or **Belt and Braces**. One of its prouder productions was *Screwed*, a play about prisons, supported by PROP (the prisoners' movement) and a strange organisation, **Radical Alternative to Prisons**. *Muck 'nd Brass* is a more recent show about ecology and profit. A *Little of What You Fancy* was devised by them for the elderly.

One group in the "community theatre" bracket which one would expect to be occupied in this way is the **Red Ladder**



**Beryl and the Perils: Fortunate feminist recipients of council largesse**

**Theatre Company**. This works as a collective, and is based in Yorkshire, where it arranges social shows to "build up a cultural-political presence". Price: £139,382 from the Arts Council, a further £5,546 from the Scottish Arts Council over the five years up to 1979.

On the other side of the Pennines, the **Merseyside Unity Theatre** is unusual, in that it presents socialist programmes, but would like to manage without subsidy. At the other end of the scale, back in Yorkshire, is the **Itinerant Theatre Limited**, formerly the West London Theatre Workshop. While its Arts Council funding is low — £3,955 last year — it cleans up with a subsidy from the South Yorkshire County Council and East Midlands Arts. It has even squeezed £20,274 out of the Manpower Services Commission.

**Feminist and Gay Theatre Groups**. There is one interesting touring company which forms a link between the socialist groups above and the "feminist" or "gay" theatre.

Of course, most feminist or gay theatre companies are socialist in their outlook, but the **Women's Theatre Group** deserves something of a prize. "We are a feminist group with varying political opinions," they say in the British Alternative Theatre Directory, before revealing that the variation is only "from socialist to radical feminism". Their plays, which are designed to "look at the general implications of sex stereotyping", have featured such gripping dramas as *Out! On the Costa del Trico*, about a pay dispute at the Trico factory; and *In Our Way*, an examination of how women are still downtrodden after the Equal Pay and Sex Discrimination legislation. Hence their need of grants from the Greater London Arts Association, and help to the tune of £49,200 since 1977 from arts councils.

Another group of "socialist/feminist" sentiments, based in Tyne and Wear this time, is **Major Diversion**. Once again, they perform "in order to examine issues concerning the political and personal oppression of women" in what they claim to be a lively and entertaining way. With productions such as *Bouncing Back*, a



DOUGLAS H. JEFFERY

**Accidental Death of an Anarchist: Belt and Braces 'articulate socialism'**

satirical look at abortion, and *The Poverty Trap Show* one doubts the claim. This is a real cheapie — only £5,000 from the Northern Arts Council last year. In much the same category is **Clapperclaw**, whose policy is to portray women and working-class people, and entertaining "without using racist or sexist jokes". Their finance has come from a number of sources — North West Arts, East Midlands Arts, and others.

More fortunate is **Beryl and the Perils**. They were awarded £3,000 by the Arts Council in 1979. **Cunning Stunts**, who perform, they say, with "an absurdity and grotesqueness not usually associated with women", are even more in the money. They were initially awarded an Arts Council subsidy of £250 in 1978, but last year they succeeded in getting £4,558, not to mention extra funding from the Greater London Arts Association. A larger company, **Monstrous Regiment**, carries the same themes for more money: it received £58,350 over the two previous years.

On the "other" side of the same fence is the **Gay Sweatshop** which "wishes to increase general awareness of the Oppression of sexuality", they say. To outline their productions is quite superfluous. To outline their cost is not: their Arts Council grants and guarantees amounted to £56,907 in the four years up to 1979 (not forgetting an extra £487 from the Scottish Arts Council).

**EAMONN BUTLER**

impose its often eccentric standards." The council is a agency designed as a buffer

government favoured one kind of art and another government favoured another

Roy's deputy and now Director of the National Trust. "The Minister seeks since

pleasures, but as Sir Roy points out: "The Queen House would also represent the



# THE CULTURAL REPORT

## DRAMA GEORGE ANN CHIDGEY

### Women, politics, and song



Women, politics, song are ingredients common to two of the most exhilarating and demanding fringe theatre companies in Britain. The 7:84 Theatre Company and *Monstrous Regiment* are welcomed back to Manchester by the Brickhouse Theatre. Both these companies have evolved a style over the past years that is intelligent and immediately recognisable. They do not lecture their audiences with ranting dogma but entertain them with moving characters and music. 7:84 and *Monstrous Regiment* are faithful to their avowed policies of offering exciting entertainment with relevance and meaning to the lives of working men and women.

The 7:84 Company bring a

play which first launched their company—John McGrath's *Trees in the Wind*. They decided to close the 70's decade with how they started it. *Trees in the Wind* is not being revived for nostalgic reasons but as a means of taking stock of what they have achieved in the 1970s, and where they are now in terms of development of political theatre and political change.

*Trees in the Wind* tells the story of three girls who share a crowded flat. One is an ardent feminist, one a disillusioned socialist and the third is a girl with a shattered romance. Out of this situation, 7:84 develop a fierce debate about the conflicts between political idealism and economic reality. McGrath's play is not merely a political

diatribe against our consumer society, for it also questions how the Left have failed to offer anything more encouraging for its adherents. 7:84 will be appearing at the Brickhouse, Oxford Road, from November 27-December 1, 1979.

*Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* by Bryony Lavery (after the book by Anita Loos...a long time after) will be performed by *Monstrous Regiment*.

They are a company of nine women and two men, who were formed in 1975, and draw on a wide range of performing, writing, musical, directing and technical skills. The *Monstrous Regiment* are committed to exploring new ways of relating music to theatre. They see their work as part of the lively movement to improve the status of women.

*Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* looks at what happens when a dumb blonde, called Ms Lorelei Lee, with a touch for acquiring money, and Dorothy Dempsey, a cynical brunette with a touch for acquiring men, get together. *Monstrous Regiment* describe *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* as a tempestuous triangle of love between a woman, herself and money... the relentless story of a woman driven to the depths of emotion by a craving beyond control. The female comedy duo of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* step straight out of the twenties with delightful fun and music... into the 70's only to find that things haven't changed all that much!

The *Monstrous Regiment* want to challenge, provoke and disturb their audience while they entertain. As the Newcastle-upon-Tyne Journal stated, "if this is fringe theatre, let's hope it's here to stay."

The *Monstrous Regiment* will be at The Brickhouse from December 4-8th.