



Press Cuttings 1985-1990

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.

Patricia Green *Hampshire Gazette* March 87
Neil Armstrong [Mass. USA] March 87
Carole Woddis *The Stage* July 87
Timothy Ramsden *Times Educational Supplement* May 88
Leah Fritz [unknown] Spring 89

Monstrous Regiment theater company

Entertaining with politics

By PATRICIA GREEN

It's late afternoon. In the Green Room of Smith College's Mendenhall Performing Arts building, two students are rehearsing a scene.

"People like you sound the alarm before the fire breaks out."

"And people like you don't see the flames until your house is destroyed!"

The dialogue is from American playwright Susan Yankowitz's "Alarms," which the British women's theater, Monstrous Regiment, is currently performing on a tour of Massachusetts. Monstrous Regiment arrived at Smith College Monday to do a workshop entitled "Poetic Images in Theatrical Form" with Smith students. The "monsters," as they affectionately call one another, turned over to workshop participants fragments of script that they themselves performed the following evening at Smith's Hallie Flanagan Theater.

Mary McCusker, a slender, amiable woman of 43, is a founding member of Monstrous Regiment. The company, she says, was conceived by a "happy chance." In September of 1975, 11 women who all auditioned for the same role with another troupe, met to discuss the lack of opportunities for women in theater. It was a fortuitous meeting, for out of it sprang Monstrous Regiment, one of Britain's first professional women's theater groups. The theater's unusual appellation derives from a speech by John Knox, a 16th-century Scottish protestant reformer who wrote a pamphlet railing against the "Monstrous Regiment of Women," crying that the power of women needed to be curtailed before it got out of hand.

Because of the eminent professional reputations of the ensemble's members, the group has been subsidized by the Arts Council of Great Britain. With steady funding for company salaries, the company has produced a series of dazzling and successful productions, playing to women's and mainstream audiences in Great Britain and abroad.

Monstrous Regiment's most recent play, "Alarms," features McCusker as Dr. C., a modern-day Cassandra who tries to sound a warning against nuclear power. Last spring, while the cast was "workshopping" the play with author Susan Yankowitz, the accident at Chernobyl shook the world.

"I remember having dinner at a restaurant and hearing reports that the radiation cloud was moving toward England," says McCusker. "It was a lovely spring evening; it was so strange that this thing was coming toward us, and that it was invisible. I haven't had pleasant dreams since I started work on 'Alarms.'"

McCusker notes an awareness of nuclear power here that she seldom finds in Britain. "A lot of people there act like pollution only hurts people who believe in it."

"It's free to get in, costs to get out!" joked McCusker, as she flagged down students for Monday's workshop. After the informal group exchanged names and brief biographies, actors Tim Gatti and McCusker led a series of acting exercises which got the fledgling actors gambling across the room.

Later, sprawled on the green carpet in a circle, the students issued forth a variety of exotic sounds,



MARY McCUSKER, one of the founders of the British women's theater group, Monstrous Regiment, conducts a relaxation exercise with Smith College students. (Photo by George Newton)

collectively conjuring first a rain-drenched jungle, then a parched red desert and, finally, an icy tundra.

"The scenes were so hilarious in your funny American accents," said actress Sue Rogerson, watching the student interpretations of "Alarms." After the workshop, the "monsters" chatted with students. The English transplants were particularly eager to elicit advice on how to weather the horrors of American central heating. "Have you Americans adapted? Sorrosted extra cartilage in your noses or evolved a differently shaped wind-pipe to deal with the wretched dry air?" wondered McCusker.

"A lot of people were surprised by Monstrous Regiment's first produc-

tion, in 1976," said McCusker. "The media have given feminists an image of being dry, humorless and bellyaching. A common refrain was, 'I never thought women could be so entertaining.'"

While the company does not exclude men, women are the decision-makers and are always the majority. This has created adjustment problems for some men who have joined the group.

"That first play mirrored our own experience," said McCusker. "Set in a Paris commode of 1871, the women characters have no boss figure — and neither did we. It was something I'd never experienced before."

"I think a lot of women don't notice that they don't have any

power because they're coping so well. There's a line in 'Alarms' in which a man says, 'I like power. Don't you?' and the woman responds, 'I don't know. I've never had any.' That's what it was like for us. There were no blueprints as we began making women's theater. You can't describe a rainbow until you've seen one."

In recent years, McCusker has seen the status of women's theater rise and fall. "In Britain, women's theater is slowly being accepted by mainstream culture, but you're still required to justify yourself. Unfortunately, there is an idea that women's theater has dried up, that everything's been said. It's often claimed that there are only seven plots. But no one would dream of telling men to stop doing theater just because Shakespeare has already covered all seven."

In contrasting women's theater in Britain with that in the United States, McCusker believes that economics play a central role. "In Britain," she says, "even fringe theater is unionized, and more funding is available. I've been struck by how many American women work other jobs in addition to their theater work. American women's plays I've seen most often focus on personal experience without making larger connections. Women's theater should be epic as well as personal. But it takes time and money to make those connections. That's very difficult to do when you're working as women are here, on stolen time."


"Monstrous Regiment," McCusker recalled, "started off small. If we'd started any smaller, we wouldn't have survived. Too often things are kept going through women's commitment, but just because you're political and committed doesn't mean you should have to starve."

"I've gained a strength from working with other women that I couldn't have gotten anywhere else," noted McCusker.

To what would undoubtedly be John Knox's dismay, the "Monstrous Regiment" continues its forward march.

"Ideas are very potent," says McCusker. "It is possible to have an impact."

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THURSDAY MARCH 19 1987

Women in Theatre Festival comes of age

By NEIL ARMSTRONG
News Theatre Correspondent

For the past week, theater groups from all over the U.S. and Europe have come together to share their work in performances and their expertise in workshops at Boston's Women in Theatre Festival. And, in three short years, this Women in Theatre Festival has earned the reputation as the most important event of its kind in the country.

One afternoon before the festival kickoff, I had the opportunity to talk with Sophie Parker, the founder, and Mary McCusker, a leading actress of the Monstrous Regiment, an English company which opened the event with the American premiere of "Alarms," a surreal nuclear age thriller by Susan Yankowitz.

Tucked away in an office, not far from The Alumni Theatre at Northeastern University, which, along with Suffolk University, hosts the festival this year, Parker is busy folding programs for opening night. She smiles as she thinks back to the time when she was putting together the first Women in Theatre event, almost four years ago. She laughs, "You know how there are things which, if you knew what they were going to be like, how much they were going to take, you wouldn't have done it. The festival is one of those things. But, here I am, folding programs." She continues her task as she reminisces, "We started with this idea that we were going to have a festival which featured women playwrights and directors, like the New York Women's One World Festival, W.O.W. of the late '70s. The shows that they did were shows that they couldn't get anyone to produce. Many, many

companies came, and it was a wild success for two years. For funding, they relied on box office and getting space donated, and services, too, like all the spaghetti that was served at a big dinner. After two years, they were exhausted."

Parker, working then with a number of women theatre professionals here in Boston, decided, "If we were going to do it, we needed a really nice space. We talked with Peter Sellars, who was then the artistic director of the Boston Shakespeare Company. He loved the idea, and then he left town. Tina Packer was chosen as the new head, so I went to talk to her. She said that careful planning was the key to success. So we laid it all out and came up with a budget of \$37,000, and Tina looked at it, and said that she couldn't go to the Ford Foundation with such a small budget. So we went off and came back with a \$125,000 budget. We didn't get it all. But she was fantastic, she helped us so much. And the first year was an incredible success!"

At this moment, McCusker, a leading actress of the Monstrous Theatre Company, joins us. A petite redhead in a bright blue fake fur coat, she's full of energy and loves to talk. "I was a founding member of the company back in '75, and we come together quite by chance. We had all applied for the same tiny part in a particular theatre company, and there were all these wonderful actresses. And somebody said that this was crazy. We should think of forming a company. And we did, and we started to have meetings. We all felt that so many roles in the theater didn't really reflect how you felt about yourself as a woman. For myself, I felt that if I played

another tart in a plastic skirt, I'd throw up. So we decided that we would commission plays that would give us meaty parts."

For 11 years, the company has produced original works. One of McCusker's favorites was one of the first, a play called "Scum," and subtitled "Death, Destruction and Dirty Washing." "It was set in a laundry during the Paris Commune of 1871, and looked at history through a woman's eye. And there were men in the show. We are not separatists. It went very, very well. And the stuffy British press was amazed that women could be so entertaining. And if you read the speeches of that time, women were very active in the revolution, trying to advocate child care and better working conditions, just like today.

"When we started, I don't think I had any idea what I was getting myself into. (Parker gives a very knowing laugh.) It's like life. If somebody told you before that this is what it's going to be, you might think twice before popping your head up. But if you get through the crisis, you get a new energy, and off you go.

"Back then, we wanted equal numbers, so that playwrights were not writing only good parts for men, but parts we wanted to play. The typical play ratio is 9 men to 2 women. But even today, that's still a battle. And of course, the government, which gives us much of our funding, is not as interested in women's issues, and they are afraid of taking a chance and failing."

Parker chimes in, "Funding is a big problem for women here in the U.S. And today, there are many more women writing plays. I was talking with one producer of new work who told me he got twice as

many manuscripts from women as he did from men. But many of the small companies here write their own material. It doesn't occur to them to approach a playwright to create something for them. That is a direction for the Women in Theatre Festival that we want to explore. You have to work with a writer or you get into a rut."

Though the 11 years McCusker's spent working with Monstrous Regiment have been difficult, she wouldn't change anything. "I feel I've learned a great deal. And when I do something else, which I must do financially, like an Agatha Christie, I take my new strength with me. And I see plays being done in Britain that wouldn't have been done 10 years ago, and that gives me a glow, like Caryl Churchill's 'Top Girls.' I've gained a great deal. I come from an ordinary working-class background, and I left school when I was 15. And I truly appreciate all that I've learned."

McCusker continues, "It's exciting to be here in Boston because everyone seems to know that it's happening. And as soon as people know it's a festival, that gives everything a little buzz. Festivals that are organized around a single idea are great, because they do focus people in on something. And this is the best festival in America. I remember a lady who saw one of our works, and it opened a whole new vista for her. She said that's what she wanted to do, to write plays. That's great!"

McCusker's off for a dress rehearsal. The door closes, and Parker smiles. "You see how things are growing. We would love to produce more works with Boston's resident companies. We

Theatre fest

Women, From 10C

also want to be able to offer more workshops. The playwrighting one, for example, we had to turn so many people away. We're also offering acting workshops with Tina Packer and Linda Putnam."

Parker's finished folding programs and must be off. Of the festival's success, she said, "It's a phenomenon whose time has come. The timing is right. And it's successful, because these plays, whether they deal with feminism, lesbianism or social injustice, are accessible to a general audience. That's the point. You don't want people to think that because this is a women's theatre festival that you have to feel uncomfortable. Society is growing up, and the work isn't as angry. That happens when you get mad, you say how mad you are, and then you don't have to say it anymore."

The Women in Theatre Festival ends today. For more information, call Suffolk University at 437-2247.

WENDY KESSELMAN'S *My Sister in this House*, which picked up rave reviews in its out of town tour and London run, is the second play by an American playwright that the theatre group Monstrous Regiment has produced this year (*Alarms* by Susan Yankowitz was played at the Riverside in February) and some see it as confirmation that the company has given up the creation of its own work to take on the mantle of producer.

But Gillian Hanna, a founder member of the group, snorts at the suggestion: "It does make me irritated. As though we've had a choice, sat down in a room and decided that's what we're going to do. If anyone thought about it for more than a moment, they'd realise that it was because of the economic climate".

Monstrous Regiment are now celebrating 10 years as a collective. Over the decade, that has not changed. What has is the composition of the company and the circumstances under which the company has been forced to operate.

Five years ago, a £49,000 grant gave them sufficient to employ 9 performers and two or three non-performers full-time, 52 weeks a year. The company

Diverse range

was mixed, though committed as it was to presenting women's experiences, past, present and future, there was always a predominance of women.

There was also a commitment to the working process—of involving everyone in the decision-making. They wanted, as Mary McCusker, another co-founder still with the group puts it, more control over their work. Equally, they wanted to work with new writers and create roles for themselves away from the boring old stereotypes.

"We just got impatient with the amount and nature of the work on offer. Mary's classic line was "If I have to play another tart in a pvc skirt—usually with a heart of gold—I'm going to puke". My line was, "If I have to play another earth-mother/shop steward in orange dungarees, I'll go mad", says Hanna.

And looking back over the past decade the company's record does show remarkably diverse range—from cabaret to epic drama, surrealism to musicals. It has taken images of women explored them, turned them upside down, often doing so with musical dash and a good dose of levity. It has tackled issues such as male and female violence, women and money, women and work, witches, adapted French and Italian drama and worked with writers such as Caryl Churchill, David Edgar, Sue Todd, Claire Luckham, Bryony Lavery and Chris Bowler.

McCusker believes the company's greatest strength has been its theatrical pezzazz and the experience gained over the years working with writers. Hanna insists it is not an 'issue-based' company: "With other groups, politics came first. With us, we're first and foremost theatrical. But our focus has always been women".

Nowadays, male actors are employed, or join the collective for productions. But the long-term collective remains an all-female affair. However, exactly what the focus of the work should be today, says Hanna, is more difficult to fix—an accurate reflection of the times and the women's movement at present. Financial limitations too have placed a brake on their work in all kinds of different ways. McCusker succinctly describes it as "inflation-keeping pace with our imagination".

Carole Woddis on the company that is fighting to keep the flame of collective theatre bright



SUZANNA HAMILTON with MAGGIE O'NEILL in *My Sister in this House*. Photo: Conrad Blakemore

A Monstrous anniversary

A £60,000 grant is no longer sufficient to provide them with full employment. Though the company decided to put on Kesselman's play, *My Sister in this House*, because of a belief in its qualities as a play, the decision did not bring either Hanna or McCusker employment (neither were in the right age bracket says Hanna). When the two are not cast in a play they are unemployed unless, as with Hanna's recent run in *The House of Bernarda Alba*, they find work elsewhere.

Yet their commitment remains total. For Hanna it is like "a lifeline—it keeps you in touch with what's important in life. I think it's doubly important to hang on now".

And for McCusker, "I've got to feel it's more important as we've gone on. I had no idea that 10 years on I'd still be with Monstrous Regiment". Yet, as time changes, so too do expectations. Where once the sleeping on the floor syndrome was an acceptable part and parcel of striving for your art, those conditions, they say, are no longer acceptable. Energies alter.

"I like to have a bed, a bit of peace

and quiet. You begin to think, what have I achieved. And with this government, fear buttons are pressed. You feel you're hanging on by your fingernails and that affects your work and creativity. If you're a woman with children or thinking of having them, it's difficult after 10 or 15 years scraping by to go on justifying it and ask yourself why you haven't achieved more", says McCusker. And, she admits, it's hardly surprising that "when your business has been about knocking the structure, you can hardly expect the boys to turn round and say, Oh come on in".

She chuckles. But the business of surviving in the late eighties is no laughing matter. A stand-still grant for the past two years (they've had a small increase this year) has meant fewer commissions to writers; a greater pressure on those commissions and on every production to be an instant success, an entry, like so many other small companies into the co-production market; and the end of a nucleus of performers.

McCusker would be the first to admit that the company's artistic fortunes

'We're theatrical animals, there is not enough feedback from a producing company for the people we are. We are performers'

have fluctuated in the last few years. But five years ago, there was a choice, for example, of three plays to send out on the road—Honor Moore's *Mourning Pictures*, Dacia Maraini's *Dialogue Between a Prostitute and one of her Clients* and Theatre de l'Aquarium's *Shakespeare's Sister*. Now they can only afford one and a half productions a year.

TOURING TOO has changed. Now managements want to see a script before they take a booking and McCusker notes that the companies doing best are those touring adaptations of the classics.

"We've always held to new writing. But the risks of that policy aren't recognised or fully understood by the funding bodies. It's a great strain".

Most of all McCusker talks of the penalties of being labelled 'feminist'. "We found it so different in the States when we took *Alarms* over. There I was treated with respect; interviewers didn't make a joke about the name of the company. They talked about the play, and the issues of the play. They didn't act like you were an oddity describing yourself as a feminist. Part of the 10 years' wear and tear here is constantly explaining yourself".

So is there still a place for Monstrous Regiment or does creativity have a natural lifespan? "I think the money situation has worn us out before our natural time span", retorts McCusker. And points out the way the company's work has fed into other areas. "Reps are doing plays they wouldn't have done 10 years ago". Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls*, she argues, contained the results of workshops actually done with Monstrous Regiment just before Churchill completed her commission for *Joint Stock*.

"If we gave up tomorrow," says Hanna, "our allocated money wouldn't go to women but to another Shakespeare touring company". Funding companies like Monstrous Regiment and Women's Theatre Group is, she believes, still a way of making sure women's work has a profile in this country and forces funding bodies into recognising that and committing themselves to it.

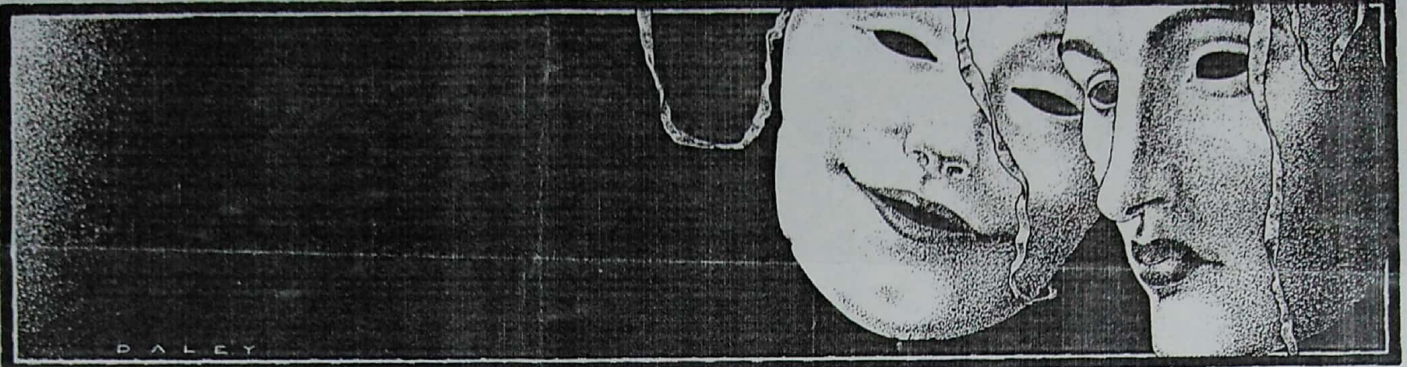
In the meantime, despite the evident disappointments involved in the failure of the women's movement to make the inroads hoped for 10 years ago, Hanna and McCusker are full of plans for the future and the collective's expansion. There is the upcoming residency at

Changes to continue

Sheffield's Crucible later in the year, workshops and a co-production. McCusker talks of how she would like to see the company in a building for a fixed period of time which would enable it to raise sponsorship and return to a situation where, once again, three plays could be commissioned and a better balance put out on the road. Work with younger women is a desire, as is more time spent with writers on commissions. (A play, *Artemisia Project* by Monica Gazzo, about which the company is very excited—a multi-media piece—has been obtained but there is no money to put it on.)

Hanna and McCusker still have their ideals: "Theatre at its best is a way of opening the doors of the mind, reflecting the very edge of consciousness of what's going on in society", says Hanna and McCusker adds: "We're still a collective; we've changed and will go on changing. I think we've got to start to grow again. We're theatrical animals; there isn't enough feedback from a producing company for the kind of people we are. We are performers."

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 REVIEW



WAVING is a strong new play by Carol Bunyan. Carol Bunyan is the kind of writer the theatre needs. Its fine production, with near immaculate acting by the cast of four women, would adorn, say, the National Theatre's Cottesloe repertory. *Savannah Bay* is a sophisticated, complex play by a significant modern European writer, Marguerite Duras. Susan Todd's glacially elegant staging boasts two fine performances; it would handsomely complement, say, the recent Genet double-bill in the Barbican's Pit.

Except that only London would benefit. As it is, *Monstrous Regiment*, founded in 1975, is touring *Waving* to many areas of the country, while Foco Novo, another touring group dating from the Seventies, has the Duras play on the road. Foco Novo has been greeted with a string of enthusiastic reviews and a 24 per cent cut in its Arts Council of Great Britain (ACGB) grant which will mean cancellation of the planned tour of Tunde Ikoli's *The Tempest* - in which the Arts Council has already invested money.

Why this cut? The only reason Foco Novo director Roland Rees can identify relates to warning sounds he received from the ACGB at the end of 1987 about his company's overdraft. Being short of money, Foco Novo is having its income reduced, so, like a debtor flung into debtors' prison, its hopes of solvency recede further.

In reply it is mounting a lobby of ACGB drama panel members and hopes that audiences and venues will support the campaign. Looking to the future, Foco Novo plans a collage of pieces by nine writers - including Ikoli, Stoppard, Brenton and Griffiths - about moving into the 21st century.

This might, or might not, include a vision of arts funding in the future. With government approval given to private rather than state finance throughout society, small-scale theatre in particular is suffering a pincer movement which is increasingly squeezing the touring network that has grown over the past 20 years. Small-scale companies have nurtured a generation of writers, directors, designers and actors. Look at any RSC or National Theatre cast list, scan any evening's television schedules and you are likely to find a significant corps of actors - some of them household names - who developed their skills in these companies. Able to play for one or two nights in schools, colleges and small arts centres, the likes of Actors Touring Company (ATC), Cheek by Jowl, Hull Truck or Medieval Players have broadened the repertoire and production techniques of British theatre.

They have brought theatre that is exciting, cheap and widespread to many a drama student and to others in schools who might never have visited a theatre building. In turn, they have encouraged young people to enter the theatre. As the spread of the Edinburgh Fringe indicates, there has been an explosion of new drama groups. Many deserve oblivion, but even the best are finding life increasingly difficult.

Funding rarely keeps up with rising costs. Between 1984 and 1987, with inflation averaging about 4.6 per cent, *Monstrous Regiment* received a standstill grant of £66,500. It recovered about 1 per cent of the shortfall last year, but for 1988-89 will have only a 2.1 per cent increase. It remains insistent that the quality of the shows will not suffer. The result? "We try and absorb the effective cuts in other ways - no pay rise, cuts in administration and heating. When it turns cold we just put on an extra sweater. The tragedy is, it's self-exploitation but we care passionately about the product and are determined to safeguard it."

Monstrous Regiment's next show will tour this autumn or in the spring of 1989. *Island Life* is the second play by a young black writer, Jenny McLeod, and if you see and enjoy it remember

TOURING

TIMOTHY RAMSDEN DISCOVERS A FINANCIAL PINCER MOVEMENT THREATENS NEW & EXPERIMENTAL THEATRE OUTSIDE LONDON

UPSTAGED

the blood, sweaters and tears that put it on the road.

Laurence Olivier Award winner Cheek by Jowl has gathered huge praise and large audiences. Yet the company claims to be operating at its limits and it has to subsidize United Kingdom tours with London seasons and foreign tours.

For no one at the centre of power seems to have noticed that ordinary commercial laws do not always apply in the arts. If you sell soap powder (the usual example, and nothing wrong with it) you can raise your profits by increasing your sales. But if you extend a subsidized theatre tour all you do is spread the subsidy more thinly over the extra weeks.

With *Faustus* and *Princess Ivona* to its considerable credit, and an 8.7 per cent grant increase for 1988-89, ATC might seem an exception to these problems. But budgetary problems mean it will have difficulty raising actors' salaries, though this is a priority. Once way ahead of Equity minimum, it now retains only a £10-a-week surplus over the union's £145 wage level. "It is," says the company, "very expensive to tour large cast productions, and small-cast plays are few and far between. It is very difficult."

How about a West End transfer? Hull Truck's *Up 'n' Under* and Cheek by Jowl's *Macbeth* reached London. But such commercially profitable shows are bound to remain a minority in a field supported by the Arts Council specifically to tour the regions and to present new, innovative and challenging work.

And there lies the other arm of the pincer. New plays are the reason for companies like *Monstrous Regiment* and Foco Novo existing. Yet as Nick Broadhurst, one-third of Joint Stock Theatre Group's new management council (it created *Fanshen*, Howard Barker's *Victory* and Caryl Churchill's *Cloud Nine*, among many new pieces), says, "new writing is notoriously unpredictable". And touring theatre needs bookings from venues, including arts and community centres and schools and colleges, but these have their own funding problems.

Consider the teacher who wants to enhance the school's drama programme with regular visits from touring professional companies. There may be some support from local industries although, quite likely, the school is also approaching them to support appeals for new science or technology equipment and letters from other local needy sources will be plunging on to their desks.

The school itself may offer some underwriting; so may the education department or the Regional Arts Association (RAA). When these bodies restrict their support, the only income remaining is the box office. So the teacher starts thinking less in terms of the educational value of shows on offer

- how they might introduce students to, for example, new techniques in writing, acting or production (think of the help to GCSE script-writing and text-performance components) - and more in terms of popularity. Choice of what to book becomes less a matter of what enhances the curriculum than what rescues the account ledger.

Paines Plough, another revenue-funded new-writing company, is holding its nightly fee at £500 for the third successive year. Yet venues are increasingly unwilling to meet the full fee. They may offer a lower figure, or reduce the nights they book (more venues in a week means higher company travel costs and more tired actors).

So, empty dates appear on tour schedules (it is, by the way, generally easier to book a midweek date rather than a weekend). With new plays hardest to sell, Paines Plough is worried at the effect on writers who are encouraged to compose small-cast, small-theme plays which are commercially "safe".

More venues can offer only a box-office split; with no guaranteed fee, poor publicity can mean a sudden deficit. Yet under-resourced groups cannot start selling themselves in 20 or so different parts of the country to back up local efforts.

Then there are the keen young companies subsisting on what is optimistically called a "profit-share" basis. Paying no fixed wage, they can undercut the fee of older groups by as much as half. This makes them very tempting to bookers.

Yet a newly-formed company has its problems. Show of Strength is based in Bristol. Set up in 1986 it has struggled on members' Enterprise Allowances of £40 a week until this March when the money ran out. Lucky in having a house of their own, they must hope for RAA support and eventual income from fees of £200 a night.

A decade ago, Show of Strength might have expected to produce a couple of good shows then qualify for an ACGB project grant. With continued success, it could have moved to revenue funding. Now, should it survive to an eventual project grant, the company will still have to pay office rent, telephone bills and hope to pay an administrator during the months between the end of one project and the start of the next.

Roy Nevitt, who has chaired the ACGB Drama Projects Committee, sees further problems as local authority money is restricted. Just as Sir Peter Hall closed the Cottesloe when funds ran low, many repertories may economize by shutting the studios which provide a backbone of well-equipped venues for tours, while shared use of rep facilities, from photocopier to rehearsal space, could represent valuable savings for small groups.

There are Arts Council initiatives of course, but neither the extensive Shakespeare tours of the

new Pennington-Bogdanov English Shakespeare Company nor the commercially-oriented Upstart, due to tour from this autumn with 20 per cent capitalization from the ACGB, is likely to extend the range of challenging new work.

However, there are two schemes which may help. Progress funding will unlock new government money, though over-stretched companies do not know how they will staff the search for private support needed to earn the new nest-eggs (it has been estimated that very few groups can hope to raise more than 2 per cent of total income from sponsorship). And a rolling three-year comparative assessment of the 21 revenue non-building-based clients with a selection of groups who have earned three consecutive years' project money aims to introduce flexibility into the system.

As new companies clamour for support, established ones seek to grow. Visual theatre (ie mime) group Trestle has had a swift success since 1983. Yet, as administrator Penny Mayes says, "We need to tour to earn a living. There's no time for research and development. We can get very tired and bored, yet we need subsidy to finance artistic development time and keep the company's outlook fresh."

Joint Stock's Nick Broadhurst is gloomier still. "In my view," he says, "there's a hidden agenda. It's to shed companies with commercially risky products, where return for investment is unpredictable. There'll be a move away from new and politically contentious writing. They are seeking to change the complexion of touring companies to safe, commercial products."

He predicts, over 10 years, an accelerating decline of state support and pressure to find other sources. What will this mean for an artistically and politically radical group like Joint Stock? "It's a weaning process from state funding. Joint Stock has little hope of finding commercial sponsors for the kind of work it does."

As a measure of self-protection, this former collective has established a new 1980s management style with individuals having specific artistic and financial responsibilities. So keen is the Arts Council on this that it has cut the group's funding by 22 per cent. This means a 60 per cent cut in artistic product; one show with five actors in place of two with nine actors. And Joint Stock, like Foco Novo, is one of seven revenue companies to be assessed this year, adding a huge administrative burden.

"Still, we've done everything they want in terms of our structure and administration," says Broadhurst. "If they cut us after that, it must be a comment on our artistic output." Which would at least be a franker situation than Foco Novo is facing.

Yet the Arts Council remains the one major funding body which judges on artistic grounds. Sponsors from industry rush to avoid the new, unknown or politically controversial play. And if the Arts Council is unable to support the new theatre on an artistic basis, those school bookers may be left only with companies who have rich dads or the DHSS to keep them going.

Small theatre companies mostly receive either revenue grants (like an annual salary) or project grants (like a fee, usually around £20,000 for a specific production covering some 12 weeks).

The Government has earmarked an extra £3.5 million in 1988/9, rising to £5 million in three years, as incentive funding - to augment subsidy to arts organisations which can raise money from other sources (eg marketing) - on a 1:2 basis. Incentive awards will be paid once only and must be used to generate future income (eg from a bar).

Incentive money for small-scale theatre will be paid through the progress fund and companies raising the £10,000 minimum may be eligible for a £5,000 grant. Some of this will be spent hiring management consultants to advise on fund-raising.

The Space to Succeed, the Space to Fail

by Leah Fritz

Although triumphs for feminism are as rare in Britain as anywhere else, there is one area in which the women's movement here has cause for a bit of celebration — writing for the theatre.

As always, the qualifiers must come out, for women playwrights are still scarce in the West End, London's counterpart to Broadway, where big money and big reputations are earned. Like Broadway, the West End has priced itself beyond the reach of ordinary citizens and largely provides the kind of escapist fare favored by tourists and rich businessmen.

There are, on the other hand, approximately 240 listings of fringe theatre companies in the 1988 British Alternative Theatre Directory¹, and most of the productions they put on are still subsidized by government agencies left over from the pre-Thatcher welfare state. While conservative cut-backs in arts funding are being felt in the fringe theatre, new plays by women, and particularly women of color, still are having a modest heyday in "alternative venues" — pubs, warehouses, arts and community centers — throughout the UK, and even in such legitimate London theatres as the Royal Court (away from the West End but in posh Sloane Square) and at the National Theatre complex. This year, 40 percent of the apprentices in the Royal Court's training programs are women, and most of the plays being produced there are by women.

Two factors in particular have encouraged this burgeoning of talent. One is the attitude of British theatre people to their profession. Although theatre, almost by definition, is glamorous, professionals here regard it as a "job of work." Even those who are quite successful are not too proud to become involved in the fringe between more lucrative assignments, and novices benefit from such close contact with old hands.

A second factor is the workshop. Workshops can consist of a group of actors who will improvise characters for the playwright, or a group of researchers, or simply a group of people whose lives the playwright is unfamiliar with but wants to dramatize. After conferring with the workshop, the author goes off to do a

I went to lunch with Adjou and Julie after the rehearsal, and Julie explained to me what *Pinchdice & Co.* meant to her: "It's partly about being from the aspiring [white] working class in Manchester. The ethic of trying to get somewhere in the world. In that sense, it's partly based on my relationship with my mother in my childhood. She trained to be a teacher while I was growing up, and that was very much the ethic in the house. I've taken that and exaggerated it greatly for the character of Pinchdice [one of the camp-followers], to look at some of that ethic in Thatcherite Britain. It's about basic greed, but it's also about relationships among women: who's got allegiance to whom. I was brought up as a Catholic, which I reject angrily, and the medieval basis of the play is about Catholicism, really."



Jenny McLeod, author of *Island Life*.

I asked both of them how they felt about the workshop technique, whether or not the involvement of others in the playwriting process ever posed a threat to their artistic or political integrity. "For a young playwright," said Julie, "not having to work entirely alone, receiving advice from experienced writers who often



The cast of *Pinchdice & Co.* by Julie Wilkinson, presented by the Women's Theatre Group. Left to right: Adjou Andoh, Alison Mackinnon, Hazel Maycock and Deb'ora John Wilson.

this country, and yet there has never been much acknowledgment in the theatre that there are people here who are not white Anglo-Saxons, whose culture is actually *this* culture. So what this play is about is all that ... I hope!"

What about the sudden interest in black women playwrights? "I think we're this month's flavor. There aren't that many, and the pressure for them to write a successful piece of work every time is phenomenal. There's no place to fail. I don't know how damaged these writers will be if they haven't been given the space to fail at the time they need it to write successfully."

As to her future, Adjou has a small daughter to support, and she is sadly considering giving up playwriting together, in favor of acting ... to make ends meet.

Jenny McLeod was edgy but optimistic when I met her at the Drill Hall, a popular "alternative venue" in Bloomsbury, just a short walk from the West End. Her play, *Island Life*, commissioned by Monstrous Regiment, a women's theatre company that boasts Caryl Churchill among others on its register, was scheduled for a press showing that evening.

Island Life is about three elderly women in a Home for the Aged who take advantage of a holiday weekend, when the other residents are

Theatre. *A Rock in Water* is to be published by Methuen in the fall in their second *Black Plays* anthology. "It's about a historical figure, Claudia Jones, who was born in Trinidad but brought up in New York when her parents emigrated there. She became politicized after the death of her mother in a sweat shop. Claudia was a Communist imprisoned during the McCarthy era and then deported from America to England. (Trinidad wouldn't take her back.) As soon as she arrived in Britain in the mid-fifties, she started organizing her community, and people now say she started the black press over here with a newspaper called the *West Indian Gazette*, a consciousness-raising paper, really, which provided the community with basic information about how to buy a house, detailing the new immigration acts, and international perspectives on the struggles for independence throughout the Caribbean. She is credited with having started what became the Notting Hill Carnival [an annual London event featuring costumes, floats, Caribbean food ...] as a response to the Notting Hill riots in the late fifties. She was also important in the community because she rallied it, she gave them a sense of confidence because she was a very strong American who hadn't shared the experience of being a West Indian who grew up here. They were very much believers in the 'Motherland' and all that went with it. She

A second factor is the workshop. Workshops can consist of a group of actors who will improvise characters for the playwright, or a group of researchers, or simply a group of people whose lives the playwright is unfamiliar with but wants to dramatize. After conferring with the workshop, the author goes off to do a draft, which is then criticized and revised until she and the company are satisfied. This method of creating a play has proved highly popular with authors; no less a playwright than Caryl Churchill still uses it, and Timberlake Wertenbaker, the woman playwright who won the 1988 Olivier Award, gave credit to her workshop in her acceptance speech.

I talked with a number of playwrights in the early stages of their careers. Unsurprisingly, they were all very articulate, but I found them also courageous and remarkably realistic — and I hold my breath for their futures, for these are “interesting times.” West End box-office success holds no special appeal for them: as Adjou Andoh, a young playwright of mixed race, commented, “Endless Tom Stoppard: what relevance does that have to the average black woman? I mean, they can enjoy it, it’s funny, but how particular it is to their lives, I don’t know. But Stoppard is taken to be the given and the norm. If you deviate from that and want to talk about a different norm, you are ‘navel-gazing.’ I think there should be space in this country for navel-gazing of all sorts.”

I met Adjou at a rehearsal of *Pinchdice & Co.*, by Julie Wilkinson. The play, which I found in every way professional and which moved me both by its humor and underlying sadness, had been commissioned by the Women’s Theatre Group, a small feminist touring company founded by, among others, such acclaimed playwrights as Pam Gems and Michelle Wandor, as an outgrowth of the women’s movement in the early seventies. Adjou was acting the ingenue role in Julie’s play, which centers on three grubby women camp-followers caught up in the twelfth-century siege of Damascus with the crusading army of Eleanor of Aquitaine. Eleanor is portrayed as ruthlessly imperious; the wretched camp-followers are in constant, frequently sneaky, rivalry with one another, although they do find that their ultimate survival depends on some kind of minimal bonding.

I asked both of them how they felt about the workshop technique, whether or not the involvement of others in the playwrighting process ever posed a threat to their artistic or political integrity. “For a young playwright,” said Julie, “not having to work entirely alone, receiving advice from experienced writers who often lead the workshops, getting feedback when one needs it and actually having to map out a play before being commissioned to write it, are all extremely helpful when learning the craft. But some of the companies don’t do it well because they don’t take the time to think about it. The writer has to be in a situation where she feels people are on her side, making comments out of a generosity of spirit. I welcome that. But if I feel, dramatically and artistically, that I can’t follow the pattern I am being asked to write, then I won’t be able to do that.”

Adjou added, “You know what the ideology of the company is when you are commissioned to write for them, and they generally know where you are coming from. Within that, there are still questions of how to represent your black characters or your women characters on the stage. There are conflicts about always presenting positive images.”

Both of them expressed mixed feelings about opportunities for women playwrights in Britain. Julie already has another play in the works at the Nottingham Playhouse. But after “churning out” two plays a year for three years, she earns less money than she did as an actor working full-time. Half-seriously, she said, “I’ll never write another play.” But her eyes were shining, because *Pinchdice & Co.* was about to go on tour.

Adjou originally studied for a law degree. But she had always written, and after several of her poems were published in the anthology *Black Women Talk Poetry* (Black Women Talk, 1987), she decided that “the way to save the world for me wasn’t going to come from a law degree.” The play she is currently working on, commissioned by the Theatre Centre for its women’s company, is intended to help answer that need.

“In the last ten years,” Adjou said, “there have been real efforts in progressive-minded people to recognize that we’re actually living in a multicultural society. But a lot of the time it’s focused on a single ethnicity, as in ‘Black people all talk with a West Indian accent.’ Since the 1500s there’ve been mixed-race people in

Life, a women’s theatre company that boasts Caryl Churchill among others on its register, was scheduled for a press showing that evening.

Island Life is about three elderly women in a Home for the Aged who take advantage of a holiday weekend, when the other residents are away visiting their families, to “go on an adventure” by breaking back into the vacant Home in order to hold a seance. “One,” Jenny explained, “is a prostitute who lives next door to the gentlemen’s quarters; one is in a wheelchair, and she’s very cantankerous and bullies the others; and the third, she’s Jamaican, and lives in the hope that her daughter will appear and take her away from there.” Their aim is to contact the mother of one of them, but numerous interruptions intervene and the seance never gets going. “One of the things that happens,” Jenny said, “is that a younger woman who is involved in a difficult marriage turns up, thinking she’s found a hotel. Throughout the play, the four women find out things about each other, things they have tried to keep submerged.”

Jenny, whose parents emigrated from Jamaica, endured a lonely four years of self-teaching before her first play was produced in her home city at the Nottingham Playhouse, a regional theatre that runs a training program similar to the Royal Court’s. Later, she did a stint at London’s Theatre Centre, where both Julie and Adjou have also trained. She was very clear about the fact that she is not interested in delivering a political message through her work: she writes to entertain, and purely out of her imagination and observations of people. Nothing she has done so far, she insisted, is autobiographical. Her next commission is for BBC television; she’s surprised and very pleased that things are beginning to work out financially. After the BBC production, she’s looking forward to a holiday. She’s written steadily for two years without one.

All these writers are in their mid-twenties, and when a couple of them expressed admiration for a black playwright by the name of Winsome Pinnock, I assumed she was an older woman whom they were looking up to as a role-model. As it turns out, Winsome is only 27.

Two of her plays were to run hot on each other’s heels at the Royal Court’s Upstairs

plots in the late fifties. She was also important in the community because she rallied it, she gave them a sense of confidence because she was a very strong American who hadn’t shared the experience of being a West Indian who grew up here. They were very much believers in the ‘Motherland’ and all that went with it. She seems to have given the people a sense of what they *could* do in this country, what it was within their rights to do.”

After a degree in English and drama at London University, Winsome took an office job and wrote dramatic sketches in the evenings. The Royal Court’s Young People’s Theatre accepted her for their Writers’ Group, an unpaid training program. “After a while, I left the group and started writing plays on my own, which I naturally submitted to the Royal Court because I had been in the Writers’ Group there. I got three rejections!” She took to heart the accompanying criticisms; finally, one of her plays was commissioned by another theatre company, and she quit her office job. “I was constantly working. And then I wrote *A Hero’s Welcome* [about three women growing up in poverty in the Caribbean in 1947], which everybody at the Royal Court liked.”

Armed with two more commissions, Winsome has a lot of work ahead of her. As she left me to return to rehearsal at the Royal Court, I reflected that what I had at first taken for shyness in the carefully, almost somberly dressed young woman, was more likely her innate dignity. At 27, because the whole movement of black women into playwrighting here is so new, Winsome Pinnock does bear the responsibility of being a role-model.

I went to Leicester to interview two playwrights of Indian extraction. One of them, Jyoti Patel, is only eighteen; she writes plays about bilingual people who, onstage, speak both in English and the Indian language Gujarati. Jyoti has been writing plays since her early adolescence, in collaboration with Englishman Jezz Simon, who was Head of Drama at the school she left at sixteen because the powers there told her she didn’t have a future in the theatre and ought to prepare herself to work at a check-out counter in a supermarket. All the powers except Jezz. Jyoti and Jezz organized their own Asian Theatre Company (later changed to “Hathi Productions”): t-



Cherubala Chokshi and Meera Syal in *Kirti, Sona & Ba* by Jezz Simons and Jyoti Patel.

current play, at the Studio in Leicester's Haymarket Theatre, is called *Kirti Sona & Ba*.

"Ba" means "mother" in Gujarati; Kirti and Sona are the names of her two daughters. "The story explores the lives of Asians living in Leicester," Jyoti said. Specifically, it's about Sona, a teenager, who was sexually abused by an uncle and left home to become an actress. She returns to visit her family during the Hindu fasting week of Jaiya-Parvathi, when women who participate in the partial fast are supposed to find good husbands. It is traditionally a time for women to talk with each other about the good and bad in men. "The play takes you through this week and you see the lives of women of various ages and how they differ from each other. But what we're saying is that it's not only Asian people who go through such experiences, but non-Asian people as well."

What is it like to write with Jezz, as a team? They discuss their general plans for the play first; each goes off to write a particular scene; they get together again to revise, and then repeat the process until the play is finished. The fact that Jezz is a man, said Jyoti, certainly doesn't prevent her from writing scenes in which women express their anger at men. "We don't always agree. We row a lot." But she grinned broadly at my parting shot, "It's better than the check-out counter at Tesco's!"

Meera Syal, who is playing the part of Sona in *Kirti, Sona & Ba*, has some impressive acting credits: among others, she went to New York with Caryl Churchill's play, *Serious Money*, and appeared in the film *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid*. As a playwright, she has written for the delightful television sitcom series, *Tandoori Nights*, which centers around an Indian restaurant, and she is currently working on a screenplay for Channel Four and a stage play commissioned by the Royal Court Upstairs.

Born in Birmingham to a Sikh mother and a Hindu father, Meera was brought up with both religions. She never thought of herself as a writer, "But I got so frustrated that none of the work available to me as an actor said anything to me about my experiences and my life, and I thought that material very rich. All the stuff I've written has been about being young and Asian and female in Britain. That's what I'm preoccupied with."

Her new play is a comedy about two Indian women who try to set up an "alternative" arranged-marriage bureau. A lot of Indian women of Meera's generation are "caught between two stools: Western love, with all its romanticism, and our Eastern values. I think there's quite a crisis going on about it." But she wanted to present it comically: "I didn't want to stand up and say, 'Woe is me, being Indian —

how can I cope?' Instead, I wanted to say, 'I'm going to love being Indian in this country because the contradictions it throws up are so infinitely interesting.'"

Meera enjoyed living in Greenwich Village when *Serious Money* was at the Public Theater, and next year she plans to go to New York for a while. Although I was tempted to advise her that America might prove a harder place to get a toehold in than Britain is right now, on second thoughts it struck me that Meera, a true cosmopolitan, is absolutely destined for New York.

With luck, Britain is now in the process of producing its own Ntozake Shanges and Lorraine Hansberrys — black, Asian and white — capable of creating plays with both style and serious content. The emptiness that goes under the heading of Postmodernism is beginning to pall, and Britain is ready for a women's renaissance. But both freedom of expression and subsidies to the arts are dwindling commodities under Margaret Thatcher's Conservative regime. If Britain is to see the glory of its theatre re-emerge through the genius of women, it will have to provide them with a living wage, to give them, in Adjou Andoh's words, "the space to fail."

As I was finishing this article, I heard that the Royal Court's Upstairs Theatre had just closed due to lack of funds; its reopening is dependent at least in part on box-office receipts in the Downstairs Theatre. So to all you US feminists planning to visit London this summer: be sure to put the Royal Court on your itinerary. □

1 1988 British Alternative Theatre Directory, eds. Robert Conway and David McGillivray (London: Conway McGillivray, 1988).

I would like to thank the following women for providing me with leads and information: Leila Hassan, whose black arts organization, Creation for Liberation, produced the British tour of Ntozake Shange and Jean "Binta" Breeze; Julie Parker, of the Drill Hall; Catherine Barazetti and Julia Pascal, of the Pascal Theatre Company; Rose Sharp and Rose Feri of Monstrous Regiment; Mary Jeremiah of the Women's Theatre Group; Kate Howard, literary manager of the Royal Court; and Yvonne Brewster of the Talawa Theatre Company.