



## Press Cuttings 1990-1993

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.

Betty Caplan	<i>Spare Rib</i>	Feb 90
Carole Woddis	<i>City Limits</i>	Feb 90
Irene Tims	<i>Birmingham Post</i>	March 90
Marianne Brace	<i>The Stage</i>	April 90
Ann McFerran	<i>Time Out</i>	Jan 92
Clare Bayley	<i>What's On</i>	Jan 92
Dominic Gray	[unknown]	Jan 92

# Across the sea to Haworth

**DOMINIC GRAY TALKS TO WRITER AND DIRECTOR DEBBIE SHEWELL ABOUT HER NEW WORK WITH FEMINIST THEATRE COMPANY, MONSTROUS REGIMENT.**

Debbie Shewell is up to her ears in it. First she's in the middle of directing *Love Story of the Century*, Marta Tikkanen's story about a wife and mother dealing with a husband's alcoholism. That opens at the Riverside on February 21st, and is coming along nicely. On top of this Shewell is also writing and directing *More Than One Antoinette*, her own reworking of the Jane Eyre story. This is also shaping up pretty well, before the curtains open at the Young Vic in March. At least one of the reasons why the projects can be kept going simultaneously is that both are with the same company, Monstrous Regiment.

"The Monsters" are currently celebrating 15 years in existence, and it's this anniversary excitement that is behind their current productiveness. They promise "three new shows in which we will be applauding the diversity of women's lives" this year, and Debbie Shewell is at the core of the first two.

Although she's never directed for the company before, it makes sense for Debbie to be involved. For her fact of being a woman working in the theatre over the past ten years means that she is keenly aware of the Monsters and their contributions to feminist theatre.

Beyond this there is a certain symmetry within her career so far, a circularity that is "bringing me back to base". She started off as founder of a small scale women's theatre company called "Little Women". Then, after years at the Soho Poly, Oxford Playhouse, and The Bush, she went abroad to work in Stockholm. What emerges is a diversity, from small scale to major institution, and from purely feminist theatre to theatre that is working within the so-called "mainstream". Debbie sees this pattern as similar to that of Monstrous Regiment itself, always on the look out for new areas to work in and explore the potential. She's coming back to base, but bringing an awful lot of experience and thinking with her.

Within the Monsters, continuity is important. The two actresses in *Love Story* were founding members of the company. But the other strand has always been to bring in outsiders, such as Debbie. Possibly the most important continuity has been in the production process. Debbie was not surprised to find that none of the company members "pulled rank", rather she said, "the collaborative process is absolutely central to all

their work. There are no hierarchies."

Shewell defines "feminist/women's theatre" as work "giving priority and importance to the exploration of women's experience." This doesn't mean that men can't be involved, or that it's possible to talk about women without at the same time talking about men.

Both plays are about relationships between the sexes. *Love Story* centres on the relationship between a wife and mother and her alcoholic husband. It is based on Marta Tikkanen's autobiographic story, and is adapted by Clare Venables.

"The strength," Shewell argues, "is that it is autobiographical. It is about one woman's life, without generalisations, yet it has a resonance that is recognisable to everybody."

The addiction to alcohol was not something that either writer or director thought could be told using a

straightforward naturalism. Both actresses play the same character, and in this way explore the shifting identity of women, and particularly of women in a state of crisis. "The dialogue is about the contradictions in behaviour and belief, that women find in themselves".

Shewell sees this as intersecting with current work in psychology, such as *Women Who Love Too Much*, but the piece goes beyond that into an exploration of the way women perceive the world. It's important to Shewell that the central character works through the questions of addiction and the problems of the marriage, and emerges strengthened by the ordeal.

The second play, which opens in March, is a version of the Jane Eyre story. I say 'version' as it isn't so much an adaptation as a complete reworking of the Bronte novel.

Shewell was deeply interested in the character of Antoinette, Mr Rochester's first wife, and the relationship of these two before "insanity set in" (which is basically where Jane Eyre starts). Shewell's major influence came from Jean Rhys' novel, *Wide Sargasso Sea* which explores that earlier relationship in depth.

"This group of characters and this set of relationships," says Debbie, "was a starting point. I didn't want to reproduce the novels, but to find new ideas, new stories, and new character interactions".

Shewell talks animatedly about new work in theatre, and comes across as somebody who both knows what she is doing and is venturing into new territory. But the thing about the Monsters is that the whole Regiment will be moving forward together. (See Fringe.)

Scene from *Monstrous Regiment* LOVE STORY OF THE CENTURY



# PRESS CUTTINGS



## MONSTROUS REGIMENT: 15 YEARS

'You're asking about fifteen years of my life!' Gillian Hanna gasped as she stood in the middle of Riverside Studios surrounded by the clatter and bang of last-minute preparations for *Love Story of the Century*. After 15 years of struggle, Monstrous Regiment, true to its name, is alive and well and still kicking shows around the country, though Hanna feels they're getting too old for that kind of thing. They've been through a lot, not least a recent Arts Council suggestion that they drop that 'dreadful' word feminist from the publicity material. For their 'own good', of course. Whose else's? Anyway, we all know that living in a 'post-feminist era', it's quite redundant.

Fifteen years ago they were a much larger, mixed company distinguished from other groups primarily by their commitment to theatre as an art form though of course their desire to perform challenging new work with women taking centre stage was intensely political. Over the years they have commissioned important new plays from writers like Caryl Churchill and David Edgar, and have brought to our notice work from the States that would not otherwise have been seen, like *Alarms* by Susan Yankowitz. Now that we are living in what David Edgar has called mean times, and the company has been whittled down to the three original musketeers (Gillian Hanna, Mary McCusker and Chris Bowler) plus administrator, how are they cutting their cloth? Hanna almost spat as she pronounced that awful word Busno-speak that artists have had to learn these days, but they are still fortunate enough to have revenue funding which enables them to do two plays a year. Like Marie Antoinette, though, they feel the guillotine may be for them next time round, and like her too, there'll be no asking why me? What have I done to deserve this?

On the eve of *Love Story's* premiere all three were positive and hopeful; the play had been well received in Edinburgh, and had had good publicity here in London before it continued on tour. Debbie Shewell, an exciting young director is involved in *Love Story* and has written their next production *More Than One Antoinette* which opens on March 26 at the Young Vic and which she will also direct. They now have a writer-in-residence, Tasha Fairbanks, who will be running workshops and supervising play readings of work which wouldn't otherwise get an airing. Mary McCusker points to the way in which the company has provided roles for older women, now that the three originators' teeth are getting longer. There was *Waving* (1988), a thought-provoking play by Carole Bunyan, which explored the difficulties ordinary women face as they get older, and look less and less like the Joan Collinses and Barbara Cartlands of the day. The three are nevertheless enjoying the generation gap between themselves and younger women like Jenny McLeod who

chose to write her play *Island Life* about women in an old age home, and Debbie Shewell.

Their adaptation of Marta Tikkanen's long narrative poem is yet another example of a tradition they've established of doing contemporary European work. The versatile Ms Hanna is not only a first-rate actress, but her performance last year of three plays by the Italian duo Franca Rame and Dario Fo, which she translated and adapted, prove that she has more than one string to her bow. Later this year they will do a version of Marivaux's *The Island* for which they have commissioned the popular Australian actress and singer Robyn Archer to write the second half. But for the present, they were all delighted to be giving *Love Story* its British premiere. The play deals with Tikkanen's own marriage to an alcoholic, and bears witness to the way in which writing can act as therapy. It enabled the Swedish-speaking Finnish writer not only to survive but to become internationally known for her poetry and novels one of which, *Manrape* (*Virago*) was shown on BBC TV in 1980. But otherwise she is unknown here, though she has been translated into many languages and *Love Story* has been performed over 40 times in Germany alone. She was married to a writer and stayed with him until his death in 1984.

The play examines the plethora of reasons why people go on living in destructive relationships, but its triumph is its refusal to paint things in black and white. She was never able to show her anger, and in the course of the play she comes to realise that living with a saint is just as difficult as putting up with a sinner. Clare Venables' adaptation splits the speaking subject into two, an effective device which adds complexity and variety. Sometimes the voice addresses the speaker, like a diary, at others it addresses the enemy out there, trying to understand him. Why does he love her so much? What does love mean? The play's ironic title is a result of her crushing disappointment. Debbie Shewell's subtle direction enhances the play, turning it from a literary piece to a dramatic one. If this production is anything to go by, the next 15 years should be good.

Betty Caplan

Monstrous Regiment Tour dates for *Love Story* include the University of Warwick between March 5 - 7, Reading Octagon Theatre on March 9 & 10, Bolton from March 13 - 17, and the Caper Arts Centre, Cardiff from March 19 - 24. See local press for details.

SPARE RIB

CHRIS TAYLOR

3rd Floor, 1/2 Alfred Place,  
London WC1E 7EB

Tel: 01-580 0442

## Gathering Forces

**MONSTROUS REGIMENT**, bounces back to celebrate its fifteenth anniversary with three new productions



**T**HEATRE Time was when company was all. The General Will, Belt and Braces, Joint Stack, Red Ladder – these were theatre groups whose compulsive raison d'être lay firmly in the idea of ensemble and continuity, rather than the explosive blaze of a single shotgun affair. But ten years of diminishing financial aid and changing values have taken their toll and now Monstrous Regiment, though it hasn't been without its troubles, is one of the few groups which remain. So it's good to see the veteran feminist theatre company celebrating its 15th anniversary in style, with a programme of three plays over the year.

In the past, Monstrous Regiment has looked to the US for its inspiration, with Wendy Kesselman's grim historical reworking of 'My Sister in this House' and Susan Yankowitz's anti-nuclear polemic, 'Alarms'. For the upcoming plays, Europe is the focus. In the

autumn Monstrous Regiment will be launching a large-scale revamp of Karivaux's 'The Colony', with the help of Aussie performer, Robyn Archer. March sees 'More Than One Antoinette', written and directed by Debbie Shewell and tackling perceptions of Jane Eyre and the first Mrs Rochester.

But next week the first of the three, 'Love Story of the Century' – also directed by Debbie Shewell – opens at the Riverside after a brief out-of-London tour. Based on the award-winning play by the Finno-Swedish writer, Marta Tikkanen, 'Love Story' is an insider's account of a marriage almost wrecked by alcoholism and a wife's attempts to create a new life from the debris – an emotional journey that, says Debbie Shewell, 'is ultimately positive but means you fall in a few holes on the way.'

First published in verse form in 1978,

'Love Story' has been adapted by Clare Venables and stars founder members Mary McCusker and Gillian Hanna, working together for the first time in five years. Shewell, of another generation, considers one of the pleasures of this assignment to be dealing with a company in which working relationships have long ago been sorted out, and with actors of McCusker's and Hanna's experience: 'I'm being employed by these actors, so they have a much greater stake in the project. I can actually divest myself of some power which I think is incredibly healthy.'

Back in Finland, 'Love Story's' creator, Marta Tikkanen is something of a celebrity, and as much in demand on the continent as at home. The play has already been seen in France, Germany and Scandinavia as well as the USA. Here, Tikkanen is probably best-known for 'Manrape', published by Virago in 1977. Like 'Manrape', 'Love Story' is seen from the woman's point of view. But in this production, its British premiere, the solo voice is played by both McCusker and Hanna – a visual device, which says Shewell, 'gives room to explore our inner dialogue.'

For Shewell, who is also the writer and director of the company's second play, 'More Than One Antoinette', the power of 'Love Story', beyond its exposure of alcoholism and its collusions, lies in its universal appeal. 'It's the kind of piece you look at and say, yep, I've done that. It's simply a horrendous extension of the destructive patterns of behaviour that can apply in any relationship.'

For McCusker too, the power of the play is in its wider application. It's not just about a heterosexual relationship. 'Love Story of the Century' is essentially about love. They both have their addictive behaviours. But it says a lot for both of them that despite this dirty linen being aired in public, the relationship survives.' CAROLE WODDIS

**LOVE STORY OF THE CENTURY** opens at Riverside Studios, Tues, Feb 21; **MORE THAN ONE ANTOINETTE** opens at the Young Vic, Mon, March 27. See THEATRE: STAGES

CHRIS TAYLOR

3rd Floor, 1/2 Alfred Place,  
London WC1E 7EB

Tel: 01-580 0442

Fax: 01-436 1489



Monstrous Regiment celebrates 15 years of putting women's issues on stage this year. IRENE TIMS reports.

# The fruit of frustration

In 1975 five women, frustrated with the limited opportunities offered them in all areas of the theatre, formed a theatre group.

Its aim was to place women's experiences to the forefront of the theatrical stage while, at the same time, presenting challenging entertainment.

They called themselves Monstrous Regiment, a name derived from the pamphlet issued by the 16th century preacher John Knox, *The first blast of the trumpet against the Monstrous Regiment of Women*, which was a protest that the rule of women was against God's law.

Their policy is also to perform plays with predominantly female casts and to deal with issues of concern to those seeking a feminist interpretation.

## Witchcraft

"In 1979 we introduced a series of mini-plays from France, Italy and America, but the main emphasis lies in specially commissioned plays and those mainly by women," Gillian Hanna, one of the co-founders, explained.

*Vinegar Tom* by Caryl Churchill was one of their first productions.

It explored witchcraft in the 17th century and the economic pressures and role of women in that society.

To give prominence to the present issues within the 17th century experience, contemporary music and song were introduced.

Music has played a key role in most of Monstrous Regiment's productions since inception but Ms Hanna expressed regret that



Mary McCusker and Gillian Hanna in *Love Story of the Century* by Marta Tikkanen.

this had tended to diminish over the years because of economic pressure on the group's activities.

"We were very conscious of style at the beginning and music adds a whole layer of meaning and understanding to a play.

There were both musicians and actors on the payroll originally but with arts subsidy reductions in real terms, we are down to

only one paid administrator."

Within the rich tapestry of their past musical repertoire was *Floorshow*, written again by Caryl Churchill in collaboration with Michele Wandor which presented "cock-pecked wives" and "househusbands" in a working class formula to turn sexist stereotypes inside out.

To celebrate the company's 15th anniversary, three produc-

tions are planned, each one applauding the diversity of women's lives which Gillian Hanna expresses as "broken-backed by marriage, children and other divergences unlike the straight linear attack of the male".

The first, *Love Story of the Century*, is about a disintegrating marriage.

It was written in 1978 and spe-

cially adapted for Monstrous Regiment by Claire Venables from an autobiographical poem by Marta Tikkanen.

"When the couple met, she said it was like a forest fire," explained Ms Hanna. "They saw each other and that was it: they knew there was nobody else.

"They saw themselves as the love story of the century."

But the marriage disintegrates and the main character, who remains unnamed, is torn between her desire to leave and her continuing love for her husband.

"If she hadn't loved him so immensely she would have been able to simply pack her bags and go," said Ms Hanna.

"But she's very clear too about her own failings, how she culded, and that's one reason why it's a really wonderful piece.

## Resolution

"I think it's very helpful and hopeful that she was able to take her behaviour and analyse it like that.

"I think that's helpful to other women in the same situation and gives the play a hopeful resolution."

Reviews have labelled it a play about alcoholism but this is hotly refuted by Ms Hanna, who shares the leading roles with co-founder

"It's a painful yet honest, clear-sighted and loving examination of a marriage in which alcoholism was only one of the difficult factors contributing to the tragedy," she said.

□ *The Love Story of the Century* is at Premier tour at The Arts Centre, University of Warwick from March 5-7.



A marriage of minds — JOSEFINA CUPIDO, CHRIS BOWLER, MARY McCUSKER and GILLIAN HANNA

# Collective thoughts

**MARIANNE BRACE** discovers that feminist theatre group **Monstrous Regiment** are not a bunch of viragos but a challenging non-sexist force

always run by men. Others were tired of playing stereotypes. "The tart with the heart of gold, the long-suffering mum." Bowler says "As actors we wanted better parts. As feminists we wanted a chance to show the world from a woman's point of view."

Today there are only three long-serving Monsters: Chris Bowler, Gillian Hanna and Mary McCusker, and an administrator. As a collective, Monstrous Regiment doesn't have an artis-

band of viragos some expected neither was its audience. "People used to think that we played to hordes of raving lefties but we never did. We've only ever twice done women only performances and one of those was a chamber piece about prostitution. We also played in the 900 seater Glasgow Citizens' Theatre and had audiences queuing around the block."

Monstrous Regiment has promoted work by British, American, Austra-

moment in their reviews.

But despite the variety offered by Monstrous Regiment, isn't a feminist theatre company in the nineties rather an old-fashioned ghetto? Shouldn't we have got beyond all that? Chris Bowler points out that there are actually more feminist companies today than there were when they began. Debbie Shewell was still at school when *Monstrous Regiment* was founded and she believes that the focus has changed. "Possibly what people thought of as a political play 15 years ago was a very conventional piece that 'said things.' I think now it's exciting to think about the way in which you say them. What non-naturalistic theatre offers is the possibility of exploring things that aren't spoken, aren't said, that are felt." And that is exactly what Shewell is planning to do with *More Than One Antoinette* which she has adapted herself. "There's a connection between Jane and Antoinette that takes place on an unconscious level and we're trying to find a vocabulary for that through music and image."

15 years ago "What was necessary was to give women positive roles". Now Shewell wants to go back to some of those stereotypical, weak images that feminists were reacting against, and question how it is that "We've been stuck with them for so long."

Monstrous Regiment has stuck to its original artistic brief but while the company still tours, the venues are not so wide-ranging. That, says Bowler, is down to economics.

Funding for the company has increased only from £30,000 to £72,400 in 15 years. "We've had to be good girls, very good girls, not to get cut." Even so, money has been found for a third production this year: *The Colony*, a Marivaux play but with a new second act written by Robyn Archer. Bowler feels "It's closer to *Scum* than anything we've done since. It's an epic, set in the past and with a group of women discussing how society should be run." So has Monstrous Regiment come full circle? Shewell says "If you say anything well enough, it will stop people saying they've heard it all before. Because they haven't heard it all before. It's just that maybe they've got bored with the way they've been hearing it. That's the challenge that we have to keep trying to meet."

*More Than One Antoinette* opened at

**Womens' issues have always been centre stage but that doesn't make it an issue based, breast beating company**

tic director. Over the years freelance directors have included Sue Dunderdale, Clare Venables and Sharon Miller. Writers Caryl Churchill, David Edgar, Robyn Archer and Rose Treman have all contributed work. Maggie Steed, Suzanna Hamilton, Maggie O'Neill, Celia Gore-Booth and Roger Allam have been among the performers.

Monstrous Regiment's name is, perhaps, the most strident thing about the company. (It's borrowed from the fiery 16th century preacher John Knox, whose diatribe against women in positions of power was entitled: 'First Blast of the Trumpet against the Monstrous Regiment of Women'.) "On our first tour, which happened in the very hot summer of 1976, we'd arrive at theatres in shorts and frocks and once we did a get-in in bikinis. In those days all the stage crews were men who were shocked rigid by us. They thought we were going to turn up in boiler suits and be very butch and uncompromising."

lian, Italian, French and Finnish writers. The topics covered have ranged from the witchcraft of *Vinegar Tom* by Caryl Churchill (commissioned when "we happened to bump into her on a march") to the alcoholism of the recent *Love Story of the Century* directed by Debbie Shewell. As well as the more predictable feminist preoccupations — violence, prostitution, and sexuality — there have been lighter moments too such as the adaptation of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, and two cabarets. Performers are as likely to appear in hairy body suits (*Origin of Species*) as in white wedding dresses (*Shakespeare's Sister*). This play about being a housewife surprised even the cast. "The set was a kitchen made to look like a church. It had a stove that wasn't supposed to be working which got set on fire and started smoking in the middle of the performance. I think I tried to put it out with a cup of water and it ended up with Mary McCusker whirling on stage with a fire extinguisher." Her choreography was so

JANE Eyre sits smoking a cigarette in Bethnal Green. This afternoon Mr Rochester marries Antoinette, his first wife. Director Debbie Shewell is putting some 'monsters' through their paces, rehearsing *More Than One Antoinette*. The play is based on Jean Rhys' novel *Wide Saragasso Sea*, which tells the story of the original Mrs Rochester — the one who burns to death at the climax of Charlotte Bronte's novel. *More Than One Antoinette* marks feminist theatre group Monstrous Regiment's 15th anniversary.

Rhys' tale of wild Victorian passion and closet madness may seem a far cry from *Scum*, the first play staged by Monstrous Regiment. A musical celebrating the women of the Paris Commune of 1871, *Scum* had the cast standing on tubs if not thumping them.

However, while Monsters, as company members call themselves, are staunch feminists, they are not a battalion of breast-beaters. Although the group was formed to create greater opportunities for women as actresses, directors, writers and technicians, men have not been excluded from their ranks. Women's issues have always been centre-stage, but according to Monstrous Regiment that doesn't make it an issue-based company.

"I hate the phrase issue-based," says Debbie Shewell. "I think all plays are about issues. Issue-based is used against the plays that people don't like, that they find provocative or threatening." And founder member Chris Bowler adds that right from the start "We were very anxious that people shouldn't be able to dismiss us as just a bunch of screaming women. The work was never polemic. While there was a strong element of political thought in it, the theatrical side wasn't sacrificed to political ideas."

Eight actresses joined to form Monstrous Regiment in 1975. Chris Bowler came from left-wing community

# THEATRE

Preview

## Return to gender

ANN McFERRAN ON  
MONSTROUS REGIMENT

During the early '70s, an explosion of new talent produced numerous left-wing and experimental theatre companies. For most actresses, however, it was business as usual, competing for a tiny proportion of roles: 'Playing someone's mother, wife or lover — and that someone was always a man,' says Gillian Hanna.

During a summer storm in 1975, Hanna, Mary McCusker and Chris Bowler founded Monstrous Regiment, a co-operative with a simple artistic policy: to put women's experience centre stage.

Over the last 15 years, the history of 'Monsters' (as the company affectionately refers to itself) has reflected that of the women's movement itself, from its exhilarating first wave to the so-called 'post-feminist' '80s. After Monsters' highly successful debut, the celebratory 'Scum', about the women in the Paris commune, the company commissioned plays which included: Caryl Churchill's 'Vinegar Tom', about witchcraft; the experimental 'Kiss and Kill', about domestic violence; and 'Floorshow', a feminist cabaret.

For over a decade the company toured exhaustively, experimenting with form, surviving the occasional flop, and winning enduring popularity with audiences throughout the country. But by the late '80s, Thatcherism had forced an exhausted company to face the political nightmare of feminism in retreat and the economic reality of cuts in the arts. For many, the continuing existence of Monstrous Regiment was more important than ever. Director Clare Venables: 'What characterised Monsters was their

chutzpah, their refusal to be cowed as they looked at some of the appalling injustices being done to women. Like tragedy, their shows energised, because they had the guts to look those painful experiences in the face.'

Before the company's fifteenth birthday last year, MR decided on a dramatic change of policy and invited Clare Venables to become its artistic director. Her appointment is an attempt to create artistic virtue from financial necessity.

An articulate woman in her mid-forties, Venables used to run one of the country's major theatres — the Sheffield Crucible. Until recently, she was the only woman to combine such a demanding role with motherhood. She is exceptional, even by Monsters' standards.

'Exceptional?' roars Venables. 'Most of the time I experience myself as a wreck! Remember, that superwoman label is incredibly isolating.' Directing her first play for the company, Euripides' 'Medea', Venables notes with relish a job description which 'requires me to think about being a woman, which I've done all my life, but it's been privatised.'

At first glance, the 2,500-year-old story of Medea, who poisons her husband's new wife and murders her own children, might seem an odd choice for a company famed for charting contemporary women's experience and commissioning new plays from women writers. For Venables, 'Medea' is a remarkable story which could have been written today. 'It is about how passion is perverted by the difference between the male and female place in society — how difficult it is to convert a love between unequals into equal love — and how we use our children as a battleground. What's important is how that struggle is played out in archetypal terms — literally over the bodies of the dead children. The only way Medea can reach Jason is through the children.'

'The extraordinary issue about why we hand on our tragedies to our children is not that we don't love our children, but that we don't know how to love gently.' Passionate love can mask lethal violence, and Venables is not exempt: 'I love my own 13-year-old son passionately, but I'm appalling to him occasionally. Luckily it doesn't take a physical form, but I can scream bananas at him. There's a gap between what we say and what we do, and that's the issue. It's not our fault, but it is our fault if we refuse to look at it.'

'Medea' is playing at the Lilian Baylis Theatre from January 22. See Fringe listings for details.

TimeOut

January 22-29 '92





# Mother of all battles

company member who also handles the lighting design. "*Friar Bentinho*," he says, "was a play, but *Tamoyos* is a trip." It is based on one of the few sympathetic 19th century accounts of the American Indians, by Domingos Jose Golsalvas de Magalhaes (the architecture of Oscar Niemeyers, who invented most of the fear-somely concrete bits of Brazil, is perhaps easier to understand in a country where even the names are monuments). He recounts the struggle of the now extinct Tamoyos tribe to resist the colonisers.

"Even after *Bentinho* we cannot leave religion behind," says Gomes. He came across the work of Magalhaes while researching the propaganda plays of the Jesuit priests, who were the ideological shock troops in the march across South America. The Tamoyos, a fierce tribe, would frequently crop up in these plays as devils, to be rejected by all "good" Indians in favour of God.

"Religion and politics are all such a big part of life in Brazil," says Gomes, and Cruz chips in: "Not pure religion, though. Not like ideals. It's all too much mixed up in real life for that." This heady mix, feel Gomes and Cruz, could lie behind the magical realism which in some form or other seems to be the endemic language of recent Latin American literature. Boi de Mamao have evolved a similar language, except that, where writers like Marquez were bringing magical realism to an art form that had lost a lot of its magic, Boi de Mamao are bringing magical realism to a form – mime – that has never been noted for its realism.

"We can go deeper without words," says Gomes. "We can touch harder – no not harder – more suffering in ideas and feelings." Gomes claims the company is not overtly political. The new work, he says, is more than just a cry of outrage: Boi de Mamao are trying to recreate "the legend and the lives of the Tamoyos Indians. And to relate that to today. And to the colonisation of other peoples, like the Australian aborigines." So instead of the disappearing rainforests, Gomes' Indians move through a kind of bead curtain jungle of threaded aluminium cans, catching the light and ringing dully, like muted bells. The sort of mirrored surfaces, the sort of trash, that the Indians lost the forest for. And the sort of trash that we're all losing them for today. Five hundred years ago the process of colonisation was obviously greedy and cruel, says Gomez; now it happens almost casually. Thoughtlessly. Daily.

*TAMOYOS* is at the ICA from January 20 as part of this year's London International Mime Festival. (See *Dance and Mime Listings*).

*Many battles have been won, but the sex-war in theatre is far from over. Clare Bayley talks to Sue Parrish, Clare Venables and Denise Wong and discovers them using new tactics to combat fresh challenges.*

Last year Jules Wright of the Women's Playhouse Trust, worried that the 'w' word in the company's title would be off-putting in the supposedly emancipated '90s, consulted Saachi and Saachi, and was told, "There's never been a better time to be called the Women's Playhouse Trust." The nine year-old Women's Theatre Group, however, feels differently, and at the beginning of this year transmogrified into The Sphinx. The reasons given for the choice of the new name are sensible enough: the Sphinx has the head of a woman (the company places women's experience centre-stage), but the body of a lion (and so is fierce and powerful). The Sphinx, like the company, is classical (to develop the canon of women's writing), multi-form (to reflect women in all their diversity) and tells stories. But does the change of name indicate a shying away from the overtly feminist history of the company? Sue Parrish, the new artistic director, is quick to dispel that notion.

"It's in no way a running away from the history of the company, or its policies, but the name seemed to indicate a kind of '70s agit prop attitude no longer true of the company for several years. We undertook a massive research project and discovered that the identity of the company in the eyes of promoters, audiences and critics was that it was locked into doing plays rather crudely about



Ruth Mitchell as Hamlet in Sue Parrish's production.

"women's issues". We want very much to put the company more in line with any other company whose identity is centred around its art, not its issues. Our concern is to present women as artists."

Change has been afoot in the company for some time, and the appointment last year of Claire Grove as the first artistic director symbolically marked the end of an era of '70s ideology (the company had been a collective until that point). Despite glorious beginnings, effectively launching the careers of writers such as Timberlake Wertenbaker, Clare McIntyre, Deborah Levy and Winsome Pinnock, the Women's Theatre Group fell into the doldrums because of a heavily interventionist, didactic approach which frequently left writers feeling as disgruntled as audiences. Claire Grove livened things up by commissioning Bryony Lavery's rip-roaring lesbian bodice-ripper, *Her Aching Heart* which

packed them in all over the country, and now Sue Parrish is keen to keep the tone up-beat and separate The Sphinx's artistic and political roles.

"My province as artistic director is to promote and nurture the artistry of the people who work for us. It may be that we also have another function, which I make very separate, which is concerned with discussion, with the struggle of women to occupy the space of an artist and be respected for it. [The company hosted a conference called *The Glass Ceiling* conference at the ICA to investigate discrimination against women preventing them from reaching top jobs.] By making a separation between that discussion and artistic work, writers needn't feel we're breathing down their necks to write the play we want. They can write from their own preoccupations and passions."

For her first production at The



Sphinx, however, Parrish is turning her attentions to the classics; specifically *Hamlet*, with a specially commissioned Prologue by Claire Luckham, which sets the scene for an all-female version of the play as performed by the 17th century actress and tearaway Moll Cutpurse and her troupe of women rogues.

Every actor — male or female — yearns to play that part of parts, and Parrish believes that working on the play is an essential part of any actor or director's training. "Until the Shakespeare bramble is taken hold of, as women practitioners we're not going any further. Because Shakespeare couldn't write for female actors, he put a lot of female qualities into male characters, therefore male actors get to explore complex parts of themselves, including their feminine selves, which female actors just don't when playing Shakespeare's female characters. It means that the kind of sexism actresses are exposed to all the time is supported by Shakespeare plays, in which men are always centre-stage, they always have much more to say and are listened to more attentively, so they can afford to patronise women."

Parrish doesn't claim that lots of all-female versions of Shakespeare are the answer to this problem, and nor would she direct the play if the only reason was to give one

woman (Ruth Mitchell) the chance to play Hamlet. Rather, she sees the play speaking to women in a more profound and enigmatic way, rather like the Sphinx herself: "*Hamlet* is a play which, as Trevor Nunn said, you could do in a different production every year because it will always reflect the time in which it is being presented. I think it's a play about a rite of passage, about someone becoming psychologically and emotionally mature. The reason why it's appropriate to us is that women are at this stage, in a rite of passage, where they *must* take responsibility for themselves."

Clare Venables, recently appointed as the first artistic director of Monstrous Regiment, has also turned to a classic for her first production in her new role — her version of Euripides' *Medea* opens this week at the Lilian Baylis. Does turning to the classics reflect this new maturity in feminist theatre; having dealt with the present, is it time now to examine the past? Is it a sign that the struggle has shifted its ground?

While acknowledging a desire to go back to basics, Venables is vociferous in countering such glib optimism. "The struggle hasn't shifted ground, it's gone *underground*," she says. "During the '80s we all had to pretend that everything was all right now, we'd achieved equality and so on. But



Sue Holland as the Chorus in *MEDEA*, directed by Clare Venables.

the struggle hasn't changed that much at all, that's why *Medea*'s still relevant today."

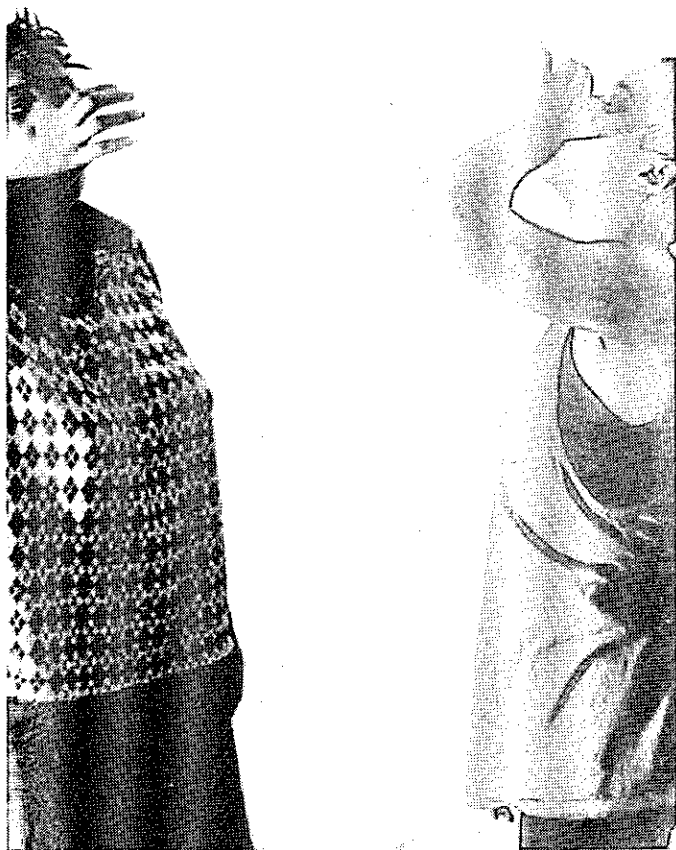
But Venables concedes that, "now we've got to get beyond blaming men for everything. We've got to start looking for how to change things. After all, anger is there because of love, as we see in *Medea*. You get most angry with the ones you love most, and you don't bother getting angry if you don't love human beings." Whether it's because of the eternal truths buried in Euripides' play, or the natural enthusiasm born of working on a text, *Medea* currently seems to embody for Venables the tragedy of the battle of the sexes, the chaos that can ensue when communication between them breaks down. "If one sex takes it upon themselves to express only one mode, it cuts the other sex off from half of their potential. There's no evidence that the female doesn't experience the heroic in herself and want to express it, just as there's no evidence that the male doesn't experience the imminent, nurturing mode. The play is about becoming more than our sex, of having 360 degrees of experience."

Venables herself experienced something of the heroic mode during her ten years as artistic director at Sheffield's Crucible theatre. She was — and is — one of the few women to run a large regional repertory theatre in this country. Her career to date has been predominantly in the mainstream; she has often expressed irritation at being described as a woman director, and raised hackles in the women's movement by saying she didn't want to be ghet-

toised by it. In *Monstrous Regiment*'s recently published book she provocatively claims that in the early days she was frankly intimidated by its politics. So what has brought her to the point of electing to run the very company she shunned ten years ago?

"At the Crucible, the way I used being female was as if to say, it's alright, you don't need to take any notice of me being a woman, I'm just a director. I was there to do great plays, greatly, and my sexuality was sidelined. I think it'll be very interesting for me now to put the two together, to be a woman director doing great plays greatly. At the Crucible my aim was to create a safe space for artists and audiences to meet and go on a journey together. With the Monsters I'm creating a safe arena for women artists and audiences."

Denise Wong, representing the succeeding generation, founded Black Mime Theatre's Women's Troupe in 1986. It was born out of a desire to attract more black women into the very white, very male field of physical theatre, and to generate new female audiences for the work. Black Mime's shows are all issue-based — their latest, *Drowning*, is about women and alcohol — but their style is far removed from the kind of '70s agitprop Sue Parrish is keen to avoid. Fast, funny and furious, the troupe draws its inspiration from comic strips and Hollywood blockbusters to make their message accessible and entertaining. The search for new theatre audiences takes them out of the theatre building and onto the streets — anywhere, in fact, where they can get access to the youth of today



Black Mime Theatre's *DROWNING*, currently at the Young Vic.

## Long live the king

UBU ROI  
Baron's Court Theatre

We would all be tyrants if we could, said Daniel Defoe. Alfred Jarry's Pere Ubu is that universal tyrant: he's Every-brat, the greedy, cunning, appetite-driven ignoramus with a den in every human heart. Jarry's work continues to astonish in its anticipation of the Theatres of the Absurd and Cruelty of Modernism and the Goons and Monty Python and on and on. *Ubu Roi* (which started life as a puppet-show) has a simple plot, beginning and ending with an 'Ubuist' coup d'état. Ubu's first victim is his employer King Venceslas. The dead king's son Prince Bougrelas strikes back, but reckons without Ubu's immunity, in a stupid world, from just deserts. The intervening action is a glorious farrago of violence, treachery, and in this rendering, of sado-masochism. Tim Willocks has Visualized some of Ubu's language and pointed up his strong resemblance to Saddam Hussein. He has also turned Mere Ubu -- Pere's wife-cum-moll -- into a pocket-Venus in furs. This embroidery matches the rest of Jarry's garish design perfectly; it also succeeds in making the monstrous couple's sex-life as recognisably, touchingly human as the rest of their behaviour.

The Kurtz Theatre Company, under the direction of Mark Normandy, do Jarry proud. The small space of the Baron's Court becomes a stylish, at times a strangely beautiful cockpit for Paul Whitby's strutting Ubu. Whitby has the brawn and the brains to pull it off, and his comic timing (as in Ubu's "I've got a dream" travesty of Martin Luther King) is excellent. Like Whitby's Pere, Charlotte Bronte Elmes' delicious Mere Ubu maintains the essential balance of odiousness and irresistibility. A single table, deployed with hilarious ingenuity, constitutes the set. This may well be the most stimulating evening the Fringe presently has on offer: an intelligent and unflaggingly entertaining update of a monster-bastard classic. (See Fringe)

SAM WILLETTS

## Stiches in crime

KNIT ONE MURDER ONE  
Old Red Lion

Is Violet Effusive really as genteel as she seems? Will Lord Platting ever recover from a cricket accident which left him "stuck at silly mid-off?" and bereft of intelligible speech? What has happened to the birthmark that distinguishes his identical twin sons? Did Victor the lovebird fall, or was he pushed by his irascible caged companion Victoria? Why has Dribbling the Marxist (not market) gardener topiarised the privet in the shape of a hammer and sickle? And how exactly did aunt's seed

cake become a deadly weapon?

For those who missed their Christmas dose of "Cluedo" or for whom curling up with a post prandial Agatha Christie remains a pipe dream of 1991, the Old Red Lion plays congenially cosy host to spinster sleuths Hilda Gibbings and Winifred Haxby and "The Platting Hall Murder" -- a frenetic, parodic pre-war mystery which they re-enact (and simultaneously try to solve) in its entirety. Playing everyone from debonair suspect Julian Sneerforth to a dying bluebottle, the two engage in an unceasing whirl of costume changes, brief encounters, tortured puns, and wickedly suggestive pseudo-Cowardesque songs.

The result is a cross between cabaret and comedy theatre: broad in its appeal and invigorated by the versatility of the Lip Service duo. With strangulated leer, bulging eyes, and gauche Joyce Grenfall gait, Maggie Fox has a natural comedienne's physicality for which Sue Ryder is a trim and accurate foil. Word play and verbal attack are their source of invention -- a source whose epithets owe more to Wodehouse than Christie and whose groanworthy sense of the bathetic derives as much from Beachcomber as from melodrama. Strictly for entertainment purposes only, but warmly recommended as a spicy and effective tonic for those New Year Blues. (See Fringe)

CLAIRE HARRIS

## Sticky ever afters

SWEET DESSERTS  
New End Theatre

"Sex, food and sisters", says the programme, but one might equally well call this a play about rivalry, bulimia, and psycho-sexual angst. In adapting Lucy Ellmann's award-winning novel, summarise essence rather than to stage fiction. The original was enjoyably and ironically skittish in its approach to form, and the play tries to translate this eclecticism using physical theatre and musical interludes (a

quirkily well chosen set of clips) interspersed with extracts from the book which range from narrative exposition to fake Cosmo questionnaires and TV ads for "sanitary appliances".

As sisters Fran and Suzy, the two actresses (dressed, like the set, in child like red and blue) start life as they mean to go on: drawing up the battle lines of sibling rivalry by charting relative accomplishment and relative loveliness whilst vying gymnastically for physical ascendance. Food features early: as an unloved child Fran incorporates a morning vomit between brushing her teeth and combing her hair, whilst Suzy "comfort-eats" with conspicuous consumption. Art historian Daddy looms large in their obsessions (a fixation not alleviated by their mother's death in their teens), and one wishes he would cop more of the blame for his daughters' (playfully presented but nonetheless poignant) disturbances (after all, why are they so insecure?). And then there's sex: a TV presenter demonstrates the Karma Sutra in mock *Blue Peter* style, Suzy sleeps only with her older sister's cast-offs, and a phone-in programme discovers that the only woman in England to have had an orgasm achieved it by eating a triple layer double cream chocolate fudge cake.

Both performances are endearing. As narrator Suzy, Charlotte Jones has a younger sister's surface placidity and inner envy ("I who have nothing", she mimes twitchingly to Shirley Bassey); and as Fran, Elizabeth Lynton's dominant surface extroversion does its own explaining as cover for her perceived neglect.

Discursive rather than dramatic, following Ellmann in making emblems and totems of its theme, the end result is witty, provoking, frustrating, sympathetic, but just a touch too anodyne. Despite care (including the Ellmannish mock glossarised programme) and comedy (the high point is the sisters' melodramatic attempt to drag each other from their fridge/shrine as Mozart's Requiem mourns the passing of gluttony) the book's resonances are not fully matched. Nevertheless the experience is absorbing and appealing: likeably, and perhaps perversely, full of youthful optimism and zest. (See Fringe)

CLAIRE HARRIS



UBU ROI

who wouldn't be seen dead in a theatre.

But while remaining committed to issue-based plays, Wong feels that the time has come to merge the men's troupe with the women's. "The troupes will merge in April '92 to form a six strong ensemble with three men and three women. There are times when there's no need to be segregated and at the moment it seems a good time to explore women's issues with men involved. We're planning a show about the perception men have of women and vice versa, possibly with women playing men and men playing women."

Women's theatre seems to be going through a rite of passage, just as Sue Parrish sees women experiencing a similar thing, and this time, though full of difficulties, is throwing up new and stimulating work. It's good to see that the future is being taken care of by women like Denise Wong, cultivating a younger generation of male and female audiences, even as the past is reassessed and new artistic territory is explored. In the words of Clare Venables, "Women have new stories to tell and new ways of telling them, and that is happening, even if it needs a double dose of heroism to achieve."

Sue Parrish's production of *The Roaring Girls' Hamlet* opens at the Warehouse Theatre, Croydon on January 31, Denise Wong's *Drowning tours until March*, Medea, directed by Clare Venables, opens at the Lillian Baylis on January 23, and the Women's Playhouse Trust's next production will be an opera of *Blood Wedding* by Deborah Levy and Nicola Lefanu in October.