

How It All Began

Extract from an interview of
Gillian Hanna [GH] and Mary McCusker [MM] conducted by Jessica Higgs
[JH] for *Unfinished Histories* with Katrina Duncan [KD] for *Monstrous
Regiment* on 25 May 2016

The topics discussed in this extract relate mainly to the 1975-1976 section
of the History pages on this website, titled Creating the Company.

The extract is taken from a near-verbatim transcript of the interview
produced by First Class Secretarial Services, with some parenthetical
[additions] and {comments} by the editor. Text removed is indicated by a
line-row

A digital recording of the interview, in two Parts, each lasting about 2
hours, is lodged with the Monstrous Regiment archive in the V&A's
Theatre and Performance Archives.

Copies of the recording are also available in other locations, including the
British Library Sound Archive. Further details at
<http://www.unfinishedhistories.com/interviews/viewing-interviews/>

Time intervals (in minutes) in the recording are indicated by [5.00], [10.00]
and so on in the text.

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[From Part One pp 1-9, edited]

JH: ... Let us kick off with a very broad question: how and why the Monsters, or Monstrous Regiment, began. Who would like to start? Gillie?

GH: Well, I suppose in a way it was my fault {ironic}. I was working with a company called Belt and Braces and I had been purged, along with several others - a show trial. And we had gone off, tails between our legs. But then the politically correct discovered that there was a revolution going on in Portugal and they felt that they should be there helping it along.

However, they had a tour of a play that we had done the previous year, called *Weight*, booked. And so they came back to all us purgees, and said okay, listen, do you want to take on this tour? And I thought actually, you know, I do. Because apart from anything else I will learn a lot about the admin side of things, which had always been done by others and quite carefully guarded, as it were.

So anyway, it was a play about the Kent coalmines. It was actually a rather good play. And of course it was full of chaps and there were two women's parts in it. And I wasn't going to relinquish mine because it was bloody good, and the other woman's part was pathetic. Moan, moan, moan. And it was, I'm afraid {ironic}, our unsung hero, David Bradford, with whom I was cavorting at the time, who said to me oh, for god's sake, stop moaning.

Because I had been moaning about all these amazing women who had come to audition for this pathetic part. And it was actually very telling, that the blokes who came to audition for the male parts were going yeah, I've done... But the women, without exception, had all been doing other things. I mean in the business, but amazing things. They weren't just sitting on their arses. They were doing things and the blokes were just sitting around waiting for work.

Anyway, David said to me, oh come on, you're always moaning. Why don't you get a women's group together? And I thought actually, you know what, that's a rather good idea. So in addition to the tour of *Weight*, Belt and Braces had also been negotiating with a...I can't remember his name. Sheffield had an arts officer, at that point, and he was a good man. And he had commissioned Belt and Braces to do a play for - probably and about, but maybe not - Sheffield. But of course that was off the cards because they were all being revolutionaries in Portugal. So I thought well, we might be able to pick that one up as well.

Anyway, a long story short, I just sat down and wrote to all the women who had come to these auditions and said look, what do you think about this? And an awful lot of them replied. And we set up a meeting in Rona Road, Hampstead, where I was living at the time. And it was the day of a huge flood. And I thought oh, nobody's going to come. There was water pouring under the back door. And they all turned up, late of course. So we took that as a good sign. So that's how it started. There was this group of women. And over the period that we met some dropped out, some didn't. But there was a core...

[05.00] And I really want to point out that it was *performers*. There was no director at this point in the group, there was no... it was just performers. And that was incredibly important for the setting up of the group because that's who we were. And that informed really the whole life of the company, that we were a group of

performers, working with such experts as we could find who would come in and work with us.

Except we got money from the Gulbenkian for a one year salary for an administrator. And that's when Sue Beardon joined us. And at the end of that year we were then put on revenue funding [from the Arts Council] [FN], so we could afford to... But I think it's important to say that the administrator was always a part of the collective, because it was just incredibly important that that person should be part of everything.

Also Meri Jenkins, who came in as our technical manager, she was part of the collective. It was the sort of creative people who tended to come and go, directors, writers, set designers, et cetera.

JH: Gillie, can I interrupt for a moment, because you're taking us into other areas we want to investigate. But can we get Mary's side...

GH: Absolutely.

JH: ...of how she got caught up in this as well?

MM: Well, I came from a far more conventional theatrical background {ironic}. I mean actually it's funny, I'm somebody who left school at 15 and, if you like, it's theatre that has been my education. And I was extremely lucky. I went to night school for my window-dressing, conversational French and commercial art and used to go to art classes, Kelvingrove Art Gallery. I'm saying that because often people assume if you left at 15 maybe something stopped. I would've loved to have stayed and it was very good. But economically my family needed me to leave.

So I was window-dressing for many years and ended up in an amateur production where somebody said, have you never thought of trying for drama school? And I said, drama school? And I don't know where I thought actors came from, but I definitely didn't think they came from the Gorbals and I thought oh, that sounds really interesting. And so at the age of 24 I went to drama school and was one of the oldest people there. Some of them were very, very young.

But it for me was suddenly being not the square peg in the round hole. All the things I liked doing, which would mean every bit of productions from how something was designed. And I loved the fact that at that time you could get grants. And here I had a grant to go and learn about something that I was fascinated by. I'm saying some of this because it does have bearings on what happened when Monstrous Regiment emerged.

And I learnt about the other side of theatre if you like, what went on behind. Because the Gorbals, Crown Street [where I lived], was around the corner from the Citizens Theatre, and my mother did take me there occasionally. And I saw things. But what went on behind scenes... And so sitting in drama school, there you've got the history of drama. But what intimidated me was doing the university course which was part of it.

And then it was there that I learnt how you verbally, and with the written word, presented things to people, made them feel safer, and that there were certain ways the academics connected with theatre wanted you to describe things. I thought oh, I see, this is the way I'm meant to answer this question about Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*. You want me to say... Because I would talk about it my way, which was

uninformed with the history of theatre, or say something like oh, I've thought up this good idea of what you could do with this production. And somebody in drama school would say oh, how very Brechtian. And I'd think oh, what does that mean? By the end of the three years I knew.

And so in between that and Monstrous Regiment I'd worked in Glasgow, I'd worked in the Edinburgh Lyceum. I was part of the Young Lyceum that at that point was going to be the beginning of the National Theatre of Scotland. And it's only taken so many years for all that to happen. Things happen slowly in this world.

And I did seasons there and I did Newcastle, not knowing I was following in the footsteps of Gillie Hanna, who'd also been there before me. And the Liverpool Everyman... So I'd been around the block and thought I was experienced. Of course I wasn't, I was just getting my feet wet.

[10.00] And had campaigned for things like a minimum wage, never realising that here in my late 60s and 70s you'd still be working for what was the minimum wage you fought for... [I] was political but not in... I mean my feminism was definitely not developed. For me feminism was about equal wages, and that was the same when I was a window-dresser. I was absolutely aggressive I realised, because it just seemed commonsense to me. Why would you not pay somebody the same wage who's doing the same job?

And I'd been courted by the WRP [Workers Revolutionary Party] as well, and never been interested in joining groups. Moved to London and I saw the Belt and Braces show that Gillian has been speaking of. I thought it was fantastic. Actually I loved it. And I can still remember Gillian Hanna with Gavin Richards on that stage and something was touched inside me.

I thought, this is new work that relates to things that I think are important and voices that I wanted to hear on stage. Regardless that many of those voices were male, because also that side of working class industrial life, which I felt hadn't been represented on stage, which was there with Bill Bryden's work in Scotland... but again, never seen from a different point of view. It always seemed to me it was still... I don't want to insult the middle classes, but very much people standing back from it, observing the working class without really identifying. So that Belt and Braces show really hit me.

So when I learnt they were auditioning people, even though it was a small part, and I mean without bumming [boasting]... I was playing good parts. I'd done the biggies. I'd done Kate in *Taming of the Shrew*, I'd done Ophelia. I had been lucky to work with, even at that point, world-class directors. Been in good shows in the Edinburgh Festival. But although this was a small part I thought wow, I was fascinated at the idea of meeting the people who had created a piece of work from scratch.

And so I went and it was very intimidating. David Bradford was one of the people who interviewed me and he had the *Morning Star* under his arm and I thought... I think it's going to be worse than auditioning for drama school, because then I was terrified they'd ask me questions about Shakespeare that I... I thought before I joined drama school I had to read the entire works. And I thought, if they question me on it I won't know everything.

And when David walked in with the *Morning Star* I thought oh my god, they're going to ask me questions I won't know the answer to. And Gillian was not at that

audition. But anyway, it went I thought quite well. And I think I possibly was offered... but I ended up not doing it

GH: My memory, and it could be wrong, my memory is that we wanted to ask you to do it, but we didn't because we were ashamed of offering such a pathetic part to someone so good and so, at that point, experienced. And we felt it was beneath you.

MM: So when I didn't go on the road with them and the letter came about a meeting, I'd have broken an arm and a leg. I thought oh, this sounds a really interesting idea. I have to say now, at no point during that first meeting or on subsequent meetings did I think it was going to be such a long-term commitment. I think it's like a lot of things. I'm saying that because, when you talk about it, it seems as if this would follow that, and that would follow this, and... And if somebody had flashed up pictures to me of where I'd be even five years down the road, I might have run.

Not because I didn't like the people, not because of anything... as a performer I have to say there were wonderful pluses from that, meeting the people that I met. Because I didn't know lots of people in London at that point. And what was funny was Linda Broughton was at that meeting, and it turned out she had also done a Theatre in Education show that I had done up in Scotland.

And there were all sorts of little links, but we were strangers that had something in common. And the thing we had in common was we all wanted to be on stage. We all wanted those lights shining on us and we wanted audiences to be looking at us. Ego, ego, ego. But we also wanted the parts to be informed by something else, and were really desperate, even me and my unformed feminism, desperate to be doing stuff that represented the richness of women's lives, not as victims, but actually active.

[15.00] And I in no way - even when I read the *Monstrous Regiment* book that Gillie has written, and I think god, isn't she clever, the way you describe things - in no way at that point could I have articulated the thing... I mean mine was, I didn't want to play another prostitute in a PVC skirt, because even with all the other glorious Shakespeare stuff I'd done I'd actually played quite a few by then.

And even at the lovely Liverpool *Everyman*, [where I] played Candy in *One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest*, and there I was, PVC skirt, and at one point topless, in what was a make-believe boat that was actually an upturned child's climbing frame, those ones you get... And I'm mentioning this because it was where you get being abused by men who are supposedly in the same mindset, because at one point Candy had to submerge into the boat filled with people, emerge back up again topless. And in the course of that there were certain people in the cast who'd get on top of me and bite my nipples.

GH: What?!

MM: Yes, absolutely. And wearing my PVC skirt. So when I said I don't want to play another prostitute or tart or woman in a PVC skirt, it actually for me wasn't just the *symbol* of that, it also stood for me of the occasions that you can still get in theatre, but you definitely got then, where if you were playing that kind of part it was almost like in the guys' minds you became objectified and up for it. So Gillian had her wonderful analysis, and I said I don't want to play [another]... [and] because even when you were playing those glorious Shakespeare parts you were also aware of the

canon of work was indeed dominated by the men... All of us wanted *good parts*, but we wanted it informed by all those other things.

And so... I mean, Gillian had to skip forward there, but I remember being so impressed when, and I think it was Gillian who came up with how the articles should describe that it would be 'her' [or 'she'] and that was seen to incorporate the 'he' [or 'his'], rather than the other way round.

JH: The memorandum and articles [of association]...

MM: And the ones that went to the Charities Commission as well.

JH: The legal documents.

MM: The legal documents from the very word go, we were trying to think of ways... There wasn't a blueprint, but what there was, because there were many political groups around, because there was a point in time when the Arts Council were funding small groups, people coming from different directions and people saying oh, if you go to the... go to the Arts Council, you get money. But it was a far different political situation and a far different situation for funding.

But I was terribly impressed that with the different skills of the people that had come together we were already making sure that the very thing that irritates you, maybe, two years down the road - why didn't we get that it would be 'she' instead of 'he'? - *happened*. And it seems small now, but it was a big thing.

And it was purely by accident that from that group the three people who went on to traipsing around things like bank managers and stuff were Gillie, Chris [Bowler] and I. Other people had other things they were doing.

JH: How many women turned up to that first meeting? And by the end of the meeting had you got a plan in place, or a small core who said we'd like to...?

GH: We hadn't got a plan. We had a vision.

MM: Yeah.

GH: There was nothing concrete about I'll do this, you do that, you'll do that. But there was a vision and a definite agreement that this needed to happen. And that probably this group would make it happen.

MM: There were several meetings...

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JH: ... So a small group carried it forward and you said you two and Chris [Bowler] were very involved.

GH: What happened was Chris, Mary and I agreed that we should make ourselves deliberately... oh, you couldn't get away with it now, unemployed. And we went on the dole. Oh, you couldn't get away with it now. And we probably thought it would take us six to nine months to set it up.

In the meantime an emissary had been sent back from Portugal to see how we were getting on. And we said oh look, we're going to do this, this and this. And

when Weight is over - that was the name of the play - we've got this bunch of women together and we're going to take over the Sheffield slot for you. And the emissary said oh well, that seems fine.

Two days later the big cheese {Gavin Richards} turns up from Portugal and goes, basically, over my dead body.

JH: What, Gavin?

GH: Gavin. 'Over my dead body'. So he went galloping up to Sheffield and that got completely... And then of course the poor guy in Sheffield had to backtrack and pretend he'd never been talking to us at all. So we said, fine.

JH: So was the idea that you would be perhaps an arm of Belt and Braces?

GH: Yes, absolutely. At that point we were looking to be...

MM: Under the umbrella...

JH: Under the umbrella of...

GH: Yes, Belt and Braces were going to have a women's group. Anyway, when the whole Sheffield thing fell apart that clearly wasn't going to happen. So we three - well, more than three, I think we probably had another meeting - said well sod it, we'll just carry on. And instead of taking that readymade slot in Sheffield we'll set about booking a tour. Commissioning someone... we didn't have any money, but commissioning someone to write a play and we'll just get on with it.

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MM: ... By the time we were going around looking for money it had been decided what the first show was going to be {*Scum* (1976)}.

GH: Yes.

MM: And the name [of the company] had been decided. When I was doing the Liverpool Everyman I can remember...

GH: We came up with it in Paul Harman's flat.

MM: You came up to see the dreadful show I was doing. It wasn't one I remember inviting you, obviously, I had fisticuffs with them. And we had two names at that point to talk through what name would be the winner, and it was 'Monstrous Regiment'. And we knew... I know before we even went into rehearsal with *Scum* we knew that it was going to be the French Commune that we were doing first, but we also knew it was going to be Witchcraft would be the second play.

GH: Did we?

MM: Yes, we did. And that was that neatly dovetailing thing of... Because originally I remember us discussing things and I can remember a play on witchcraft was a very popular choice because it encapsulated, because of the abuse of women and all the other things we were feeling, and also historical plays seemed to be a good way of approaching it. And you had found the papers on the Paris Commune...

GH: The Jackdaws, do you remember the old Jackdaws? {History document publications}

MM: But also can I say, that Gillie Hanna when she... Well, these are the things that I remember, is that when you had been in France studying, at one point, you had worked in a laundry.

GH: Yes, I had.

MM: And it was quite obvious that when we did the talking with Claire [Luckham] and Chris [Bond] about the writing of it, of course we wanted it to be from the women's perspective. And it wasn't going to be about the men at the barricades but the women...

[25.00] And it was set in a laundry, *Scum*. And I always thought it was most appropriate, that it was a work play where women worked. But at the same time they were an important part of this historical event. And you had worked in a laundry.

GH: I had.

MM: And I loved it as well because as a window-dresser I had to iron everything into a window. And people say 'ironing, oh, I hate ironing'. I say, I don't associate ironing [with]... I like ironing. I took great pride in my ironing. I loved the fact I never burnt things. And when we toured I would always do wardrobe and packing the van, because I...

JH: Well, that brings me to a question I wanted to ask about those original members like Chris [Bowler] and Linda [Broughton] and Helen [Glavin] - what they brought, what you all brought to the mix that was at the centre of Monstrous Regiment, and why those people chose to go on the path of creating their own work?

GH: I think a lot of it was serendipity.

MM: Yeah.

GH: This happened to be a bunch of women who for arbitrary reason, really, got together. I think also we were all being pushed along by a huge headwind of what was happening at that time. And it was incredibly exciting, because this is a huge moment of social change - ha-ha, but that's what we thought at the time. Well it was, to an extent.

MM: It was.

GH: And I want to be part of it. And if I can harness what I like doing, acting and being part of a theatrical endeavour, if I can harness that to this wind, how exciting will that be?

I'm not sure, I don't know about anybody else, but I'm not sure how consciously I thought of that. I didn't. It was just there. It wasn't that I sat down and thought that, but it was there.

JH: It was the spirit of the time.

GH: Yeah.

MM: It was the spirit of the time, and I think people were saying yes to an opportunity to be involved. And I think possibly even [for] me thinking well, it wasn't going to be the rest of your life. And at that point I must admit the thing that had never filtered through to me as a performer was how many other things I'd have to be involved with apart from the performing.

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[From Part Two, pp 8-9, edited]:

GH: ... To go right back [to the beginnings of the company], when the Sheffield opportunity and pots of money fell through, none of us were sure how to raise money, and I do remember one of the things we did, I think it was you and me and Chrissie. We'd heard that there was a bank in Finchley {North London} that had a woman bank manager. Those were in the days when you had bank managers and you... And we thought she might be slightly more sympathetic. So we went to see...

MM: That was very naive for a woman of your...

GH: Oh god.

MM: ...roots, Gillian.

GH: [25.00] I know. Well, we went to see her about a loan and she wanted to know what collateral we were offering. And we looked at her and she went 'jewellery?' So anyway. So somehow or another, I can't remember how, we got introduced to a woman called Ruth Marks. Now, Ruth Marks, she didn't run the touring department of the Arts Council but she was the second in command. So the guy, can't remember his name now, who ran it, he did all the big number one tours and the blah-blah... And Ruth got stuck with all of us roughians.

Anyway, we went to see her. And she was completely brilliant. She said okay, this is how it works if you want money from the touring department. First of all it has to be a tour, obviously. You book the tour, you calculate your income from the tour, you work out your expenses, you put the two together and there'll obviously be a gap. You apply to us for a sum of money to fill the gap, and that is called a guarantee against loss. So we thought oh, that sounds alright.

So... she knew of us as individuals. So she knew that we had track records. She knew about Chrissie because Chrissie had been in all sorts of companies. She knew that I'd been in 7:84 and Belt and Braces. She knew Mary from Edinburgh and all of that. But she had this way, which I don't think anybody would either want to do, or get away with today, which is she backed her instincts. And she thought that we were a goer.

So she said right, show me a halfway decent tour and I will give you a guarantee against loss. So that's what we did. We went away, I remember in Rona Road, I don't think you were there, I had to sign a piece of paper because we were going to do a week, I think in Sheffield actually, in the studio...

MM: It would've been because that was one of the weeks that we had.

GH: It was one of the weeks we had. And I was reading through the contract and it said, if you don't fulfil this you personally owe us £5,000. Now, in 1975, £5,000 is an awful lot of money. And I thought oh god... I thought oh fuck it, so I signed it.

It was fine. We got a pretty good tour together. And we got our guarantee against loss and that was all because of Ruth: (a) because she backed her instincts that we would be okay, and [(b)] she had the power to... I mean in terms of the Arts Council it wasn't a huge amount of money, but to us it was an enormous amount of money.

MM: She was positively helpful about suggesting things.

GH: And she was really helpful. If you got into trouble about something you didn't understand, or how does this work, Ruth would tell you. And I have to say, the other people who are forever in her debt are Cheek by Jowl, because she backed them. And I think they will tell you that if you ask them.

And then we were just very, very lucky because it was at the time when revenue grants were still being given out, and they saw *Scum*, and *Vinegar Tom*, and realised that we were serious and that we were doing good work. And so I think it was almost unprecedented, the second year we got put on revenue {3-year funding periods, as distinct from individual 'project' funding}

KD: Sorry, which show did you get the guarantee against loss for? Was it *Scum*?

GH: *Scum*.

MM: *Scum*.

GH: *Scum* and then the second...

MM: And we were ingenious with money because we'd put in for the hire of musical equipment and speakers...

GH: Shh, shh. I don't remember that.

MM: And for lying in proper beds {i.e. accommodation costs}. You weren't allowed to spend any of the money on *capital* stuff. You could [only] hire things. And we did, we did hire some stuff. But we didn't [always] lie in proper beds. We had hospitality and foam sheets in some places, strips on the floor. And with [the savings from] that, managed to get little pockets of money that we then bought some equipment that we would have.

GH: And in those days, the other saviour of lots of little groups was the Gulbenkian Foundation.

[30.00] So that's when we applied to the Gulbenkian for a year's salary for an administrator, which they gave us. So by the time that was spent we were on revenue [funding] and so we were all...

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MM: We used it ingeniously. We would sometimes make a collective decision to sign on [as unemployed] and use the money {whispers} on other things. But it was calculated.

GH: Yes. In the middle of one tour we happened to have a week or two weeks off, just nothing booked. And so we hired a room somewhere in Covent Garden I think it was, and we got people in to give us classes. Sonnet reading, voice... Because we were serious about the work.

MM: Yeah. The voice workshops we did, all sorts of stuff. We were imaginative with money, but you had the possibility of being imaginative with money because we were doing enough weeks [of touring] that we were qualifying by any stretch of the imagination workwise.