

ON STAGE

Bleak outlook well conjured

Derby Playhouse Studio: Alarms, by Susan Yankowitz, directed by Penny Charns, designed by Iona McLeish, presented by Monstrous Regiment (until tomorrow night).

THIS is a highly stylised essay on the post-Chernobyl human condition. It is not, as one might assume from the name of the company, a stridently feminist work, nor does its anti-nuclear message apply simply to the bomb. Instead, it puts up radiation as the enemy with a vigour that must be derived from Greek tragedy. We are up against fate, or so I interpret the message.

The feminist message, which comes through by implications, is that women suffer the worst. In the cast of four, the solitary male represents the complacent establishment.

Against him we see woman the victim, woman the frustrated intellectual, and the personification of woman in her other aspects. The parable is vigorously acted, and splendidly spoken.

Full marks for performance to the cast, Tim Gatti, Mary McCusker, Sue Rogerson and Gerda Stevenson.

Lewis Meakin

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THE STAGE

Play Reviews

Peter Hepple on a mysterious muddle with a French farce

Ooh la la, Cooney

SHAFTESBURY An Italian Straw Hat

IT'S almost a case of "mystery surroundings" at An Italian Straw Hat at the Shaftesbury. Gone are the original adapter and director, gone too is Michael Nyman's music, though he still has a programme credit. Now, with presumably some acknowledgement to Eugene Labiche, the play is both written and directed by Ray Cooney, and it does bear certain signs of a last-minute rescue job.

What does survive intact is a splendid series of settings by Saul Radomsky — richly rococo interiors, the exterior of an art nouveau cafe and the adjoining houses, a finely ornamented church, a Turkish bath and even the top of the Eiffel Tower.

But settings do not exactly a play make, and what we are left with is an Anglicised French farce which, as in the original, is really an extended chase sequence. Fadinard, enjoying a bit of

ooh la la with an old flame in the bushes an hour or two before his wedding to the highly respectable daughter of a she-dragon, is forced to run all round Paris in search of an Italian straw hat which is the duplicate of one eaten by his horse while he was engaged in his pre-nuptial dalliance.

The hat belonged to the wife of the Registrar who is about to marry Fadinard, and she herself was at the time involved in an illicit liaison with an army officer, though she has since entrenched herself in Fadinard's flat, which does not belong to Fadinard at all, if you follow me, but to his dodderly uncle and is filled with priceless antiques which the hysterical lady threatens to destroy one by one unless she gets back her hat.

So Fadinard is perforce required to gallop from church to hat shop to salon to Eiffel Tower to cafe — the order may not be correct but is immaterial — all the time pursued by his bride and her large, irritable family.

The mechanics of the play are more

intriguing than either the dialogue or the situations, for delicacy has been overthrown in favour of trousers round the ankles and various examples of time-honoured comic business which are probably not entirely out of place at this time of year. Tom Conti, spending much of his time addressing the audience directly, is a graceful comedy actor in an excitable sort of way and works himself into a frazzle to get the laughs, adopting an Italian accent to further ram the comedy home.

Puffing along in support are Clive Dunn as the venerable uncle, Stratford Johns as the Registrar, Deborah Norton tackling both the unfaithful owner of the hat and a baroness with the chipped, cut-glass accent of the mature Sloane and John Dalby as a portly pianist whose favourite piece of music is something called The Bending Boy. But one of the most polished performances comes from Mark Hadfield as a servant whose own love life is constantly interrupted by the necessity of having to catch a falling vase.

CYGNET THEATRE Arms and the Man

CHAGFORD, an ancient microdot village on Dartmoor, gets a chance to see professional theatre now and then. The Cygnet Theatre Group, from the Northcott, Exeter, toured with Shaw's comedy Arms And The Man.

In a rural setting the high camp, almost burlesque, send up of Bulgarian military and self appointed aristocrats takes on an added dimension. Parts of rural Devon cling hard to old standards. Victorian values have never left this area.

The practical soldier whose sense of self preservation is an overriding consideration still wears well. Also the pricking of the pomposity of the gentry.

It is a hopeful sign that this production is full scale with three scene changes and costumes and props well chosen and in period.

Arms and the Man, one of Shaw's Pleasant plays has an unpleasant layer about the manservant Nicola having "the soul of a servant". In the end he

gives up his fiancée in the hope she will become a customer of his new shop in Sofia. Shaw's plays are constantly on tour in Bulgaria and it is easy to see why Arms and the Man is the favourite. It satirises pre-communist Bulgaria and raises the status of the "lower orders" with some penetrating and logical argument.

Allen Saddler

MONSTROUS REGIMENT Alarm

TEN YEARS on the road this year, Monstrous Regiment has cause for celebration. Mere survival in an era of cuts is a matter of note.

The good humour and exuberance of the earlier shows made the case just as forcefully as the company's latter and more gloomy plays. Alarms is in the latter category.

A woman doctor, obsessed by the possible effects of radiation, bans X-rays and kicks up all kinds of fuss about leaky reactors. Her extreme views cause her to fall foul of fellow doctors and the authorities in general. The only way to

discount her proof of radiation on still born babies is to ridicule her. During the play she becomes increasingly isolated.

The doctor, who, in a prologue of mythology, is Cassandra, has the gift of prophecy, and therefore we should take her warnings seriously. The arguments about the level of radiation in everyday life are put by the opposition.

Alarms, a non-naturalistic piece of theatre by Susan Yankowitz, is a fine and lyrical piece of writing. Some passages are breath taking; but none of this adds up to a play, and some of it is repetitious. The steel frame set and the various visual devices suggest science fiction more than contemporary life.

Mary McCusker plays the doctor with impressive sincerity. Sue Rogerson represents womankind in all cases of put upon experimentation, while Gerda Stevenson plays a hard nosed media tart involved in the scheme to muck rake the doctor into obscurity. Tim Gatti plays all the male roles. Penny Cherns directs this uncomfortable experience with taste and intelligence.

Allen Saddler

LYN GARDNER on the London Fringe

'Don't you think you're a little bit paranoid?' asks the man in *Alarms* (Riverside). 'Of course', comes the reply, 'it's the appropriate response to the times'. Paranoia, panic, fear, alienation and despair were the key-notes of the Fringe in the early weeks of 1987. Maybe it was the bitter cold that turned most venues into ice-boxes that engendered the gloom, for there was certainly a spirit of resignation and pessimism abroad in many of the productions on offer.

An up-dated version of Barrie Keeffe's *Frozen Assets* (Half Moon) painted an even grimmer picture of Docklands life than when it was first produced by the RSC in the late '70s; Jim Cartwright's *Road*, an elegy to the wasting spirit of '80s England got its third production at the Royal Court; Crowe and Zajdlie's *Cannibal* made you feel that, compared with humans, the piranah fish is rather friendly; *Fallen* at the Drill Hall traced the stifling sexual repression of contemporary Ireland in a fictionalised dramatisation of the Kerry babies case, and even Ionesco's autobiographical *Journeys Among the Dead* sacrificed the absurd for a litany of recrimination and bitterness.

It was left to Cheek by Jowl (at the Donmar with *Twelfth Night*), Temba's touring production of *Woza Albert!* and James Baldwin's *The Amen Corner* (Tricycle) to prove that melancholy can be touched by joy, injustice overcome with exhilarating resistance and poverty and intransigence defeated by the redemptive power of love.

Alarms at Riverside was a commissioned piece for the feminist touring company Monstrous Regiment. If it were not for the fact that the author is the American-based Susan Yankowitz, I would say that its poetic intensity and juggling of the literal and metaphorical, myth and reality, was much influenced by the work of Deborah Levy. Indeed, with one of Monstrous Regiment's founder members, Susan Todd, currently directing Levy's *Heretics* at the Pit, former RSC director, Penny Cherns, orchestrating *Alarms*, and designer Iona McLeish providing the setting for both, comparisons become almost inevitable. A passionate warning against the hazards of nuclear power, *Alarms* pitted a latter-day Cassandra, Dr C, against a state determined to silence her by fair means or foul. Dismissed by her colleagues as a loony and gagged by the secret service, Dr C is left, like Cassandra in the ruins of Troy, lamenting 'a civilisation which cannot afford any more human errors' and yet blindly seeks its own destruction.

Curiously, although theatrically innovative and despite its post-Chernobyl resonances, *Alarms* seemed oddly dated in its response to the dangers of the nuclear power industry. Factually selective and uninterested in the relation between power and profit, *Alarms* settled for a 'let's hold hands and the world will be a better place' kind of approach. 'In the deafening roar of the world who will hear if you don't scream?' cries the



Marc Tufano as Buddy and Penny Jones as Joan in the revised version of Barrie Keeffe's *Frozen Assets* at the Half Moon. Photo: Mike Sanders

despairing Dr C. Too true, but if the screaming is incoherent it might just be dismissed as hysteria. Nevertheless, a stunning production of a flawed but terrifyingly beautiful play.

Ionesco's *Journeys Among the Dead* (also Riverside) marked the debut production by the new BP sponsored Springboard Company — a group that aims to bridge the gap between students and fully fledged professionals. Stuart Wood's production was earnest rather than inspired, but given a script that was a slow drip of resentment and rancour, it cannot have been the easiest job in the world.

A dense crossword puzzle of a play, littered with clues of memory and the subconscious, *Journeys* drew heavily upon Ionesco's Rumanian childhood and particularly his uneasy and competitive relationship with his father. It was a play that lacked either compassion or (except in one glorious dream sequence at a bus stop) any sense of the comic or absurd. Has the high clown finally lost his touch?

Introspection (and self-indulgence) were evident too at the London International Festival of Mime. David Glass' *Dinosaur of Welschmeiz* (The Place) was as pretentious as the title — a one-man show that needed half a page of written explanation ('Alex Box is a successful nature film-maker, he has just turned 30 and has come to Brazil to make the ultimate film, the subject of which he is still uncertain . . . etc, etc) to even begin to make it accessible.

The Axis company from Canada came to Battersea Arts Centre with two short pieces: an over-extended comic sketch called *Synthetic Energy* and *Fool's Angel*, which had strong overtones of early Beckett.

I only managed to catch a handful of the 20 odd shows on offer during the festival, but apart from obvious gems from Ben Keaton (*Intimate Memoirs* . . .); Theatre de Complicité (what festival is complete without them!) and Trestle (*A Slight Hitch*), the most interesting work I saw came from Europe. The ICA played host to both Pat Van Hemelrijck's *Terracotta* and the Belgian-based company Wissel with *The Containers*. The former was a delightfully quirky tour around the world (fasten your seatbelts and have

your sick-bag ready) with its creator spending much of the evening in a large display case; the latter was a surreal black comedy based on the Greek myth of Procrustes — the inn-keeper who dismembered his guests to fit the beds. Like Theatre de Complicité, Wissel are a company who draw both on mime and visual or performance theatre techniques. The cross-fertilisation is remarkably fruitful.

Quite the most exciting work of the month on the Fringe presented pictures of Black life: in South Africa and 1950s Harlem. Temba gave a fine revival to *Woza Albert!*, proving that five years on the play is not only an exhilarating piece of physical theatre but remains entirely relevant to the South African situation. James Baldwin's *The Amen Corner* (Tricycle) is also more than a period piece. It is dated and it is certainly sentimental, but in Anton Phillips exemplary revival it burst with vitality and excitement. Proof that there can be laughter even in adversity.

CAROL WODDIS at Gay Sweatshop as it goes P.O.S.H.

Do you want to be POSH? Or maybe Very POSH? Of course you do. And it'll only cost you £10. Didn't think it could be that easy, did you. But Gay Sweatshop have found a way. Having finally achieved charitable status (after many years lobbying for it), P.O.S.H. — it stands for Pals of Gay Sweatshop — is their new individual covenant scheme, soon to be launched on an unsuspecting world at the end of the work-in-progress season at the London Oval in March (March 11-22). Killing two birds with one stone, so to speak, GS, still our only professional gay theatre company are about to enter a new phase in their ever-changing course.

Building on the success of their first work-in-progress — Gay Sweatshop x 10 a couple of years ago (to celebrate their first ten years) this latest initiative — Gay Sweatshop x 12 — shows GS turning adversity to positive advantage with a vengeance; launching an appeal fund to cover the

Monstrous Regiment sounding 'Alarms'

"ALARMS" Drama by Susan Yankowitz, directed by Peggy Cherns, designed by Iona McLeish, lighting by Veronica Wood, costumes by Helen Fitzwilliam and Sasha Kelt. Monstrous Regiment production presented by Women in Theater Festival '87, last night and tonight at Alumni Auditorium, Northeastern University.

By John Engstrom
Special to The Globe

One of the leading political theater groups in the English-speaking world opened Boston's Women

In Theater Festival last night. It was Monstrous Regiment, named after a 17th century

misogynist diatribe, founded in 1975 to provide a platform for women and politics, and a supportive venue for such major voices as Caryl Churchill and David Edgar. By no means limited to British writers, though, the company collaborates with Americans Wendy Kesselman and Susan Yankowitz, and it is the latter's "Alarms" that Monstrous Regiment performs here.

Writing in an episodic, fragmented and dreamlike style, Yankowitz interweaves elements of classical myth with contemporary issues on nuclear power. Cassandra, the Greek prophetess doomed to mouth her apocalyptic visions to uncomprehending ears, is also Dr. C., a physician obsessed with the destruction of life

attributable to radiation; both characters are played by the same actress, Mary McCusker.

There is other sharing of roles in the cast of four: Tim Gatt is Dr. Ap (short for Apollo), a doctor who refuses to heed the message of Dr. C.; and Mr. Deal, a sinister figure in black bowler and glasses who presumably stands for capitalism. Rounding out the company is Gerda Stevenson as an opportunistic photographer who trails Dr. C. at Mr. Deal's behest, and Sue Rogerson as a host of women.

The only major disappointment in the show is Yankowitz' script, in which realistic characterization and allegory coexist uncomfortably. At her best, Yankowitz produces witty, ironic jokes and graceful passages, and

possesses a sure sense of how long a scene should last. But once the parameters of the situation are laid down there's little deepening or development, just incessant repetition of an obvious message.

What's worth the while here is the performance. The direction by Penny Cherns flows smoothly; there is an imaginative sculptural set by Iona McLeish, and poetic lighting by Veronica Wood. As Dr. C., who suffers nervous collapse and ends up in a straitjacket, Mary McCusker handles difficult transitions with physical grace and dramatic power.

Curtain call

By NANCY TUTTLE
Sun Staff

A surrealistic vision of a world gone crazy in the nuclear age, Susan Yankowitz's *Alarms* opened the Women in Theatre Festival '87 last weekend at Northeastern University's Alumni Auditorium. Performed by Monstrous Regiment, a highly-acclaimed British company, *Alarms* offered a devastating interpretation of the mythical Cassandra, the Greek prophetess whose predictions were doomed to be ignored, bringing it into the nuclear age. As a modern-day physician, Dr. C's apocalyptic foresight brings her into an odyssey of terror and intrigue.

The Festival continues through today, celebrating the creative talent of women playwrights, directors and performers throughout the U.S. and Europe.

"You've come a long way, baby," proclaims the fluffy blonde, her smile wrapped around teeth the size of Ten Commandment tablets, from the billboard overlooking the intersection of Cambridge and Temple streets. Up Temple at the Suffolk University Theatre, though, the handful of women who organized and brought forth the recent Women in Theatre Festival 87 were not so sure. Their "baby," now in its third year, is the only women's theater festival still extant in these parts, and its funding, mostly by the Massachusetts Council on the Arts and Humanities, isn't what it should be. For example, it wasn't possible this year to bring either of the grandmothers of women's theater in this country, Minneapolis's At the Foot of the Mountain or the Omaha Magic Theatre (whose *Mud* was the highlight of last year's gathering) to Boston. Nonetheless, the women in theater are still kicking — and not in any Rockettes line. Over the course of nine days in March, they presented 16 performances (of which I saw 11), including imports from London, San Francisco, Louisville, and the Big Apple, as well as assorted workshops on acting, playwriting, and vocal technique and panel discussions of "women, playwriting, and the female imagination," alternative forms, and feminist criticism (being a woman in theater several nights a week, I participated in that one). And they divested themselves of as many \$8 T-shirts as were humanly hard-salable.

What was most encouraging about the festival — and it still has a long way to go, baby, toward the melding of art and politics — was that so many of the performances did in fact celebrate women, rather than party line, in performance. Feminist cartoons were little in evidence, though a few pieces did descend into self-congratulatory Helen Reddyism or angst-ridden Martha Grahamism: I am woman, hear me roar and see me dance to my oppression. And a couple of theater pieces here (though written and/or directed by women, as per festival criterion) were curiously retrograde in their attitudes toward women. But for the most part, Women in Theatre 87 incorporated its feminism in a larger agenda: the British company, Monstrous Regiment (which takes its name from the text of a misogynist 16th-century pamphlet abhorring female activism), presented Susan Yankowitz's *Alarms*, in which a latter-day Cassandra warns against the dangers of irradiation. New York's WOW Cafe offered *Patience and Sarah* not as a propagandistic espousal of lesbianism but as a warm and feisty romance whose thwarted lovers just happen to be gay — in a time and place where all sex not sanctioned by the Bible, for procreative purposes, was suspect. And Vermont's inimitable Janice "GAL" Perry, performing a mix of stand-up comedy and off-the-wall set pieces, addressed such issues great and small as American militarism, radiation in the wake of Chernobyl, woman-oriented erotica, and sewing. She makes her own clothes and, between wry leftist raps, recounts the trials and tribulations of stitchery. She also goes a long way toward puncturing, with her trusty needle, the backwoods notion that all feminists park their sense of humor with their razors.

Economics being a big factor — especially since Women in Theatre 87 specialized in women in alternative theater — there were a number of one-person shows presented at the festival, and not even the more populous efforts overflowed with production values. This made the appearance of Monstrous Regiment (at Northeastern University's Alumnae Hall, prior to the festival proper and cosponsored by the NU Arts performance series) all the more of an event. Given the British system of subsidy for the arts, even this 11-

year-old radical collective (which has produced work by Caryl Churchill, David Edgar, Honor Moore, and Franca Rame, among others) is funded sufficiently to maintain high professional standards. It is demoralizing to compare this troupe, rigorously trained and polished, to our own ragtag political theaters, such as Maxine Klein's recently decamped Little Flags, whose financial beleaguering ultimately affects the quality of their work. Although *Alarms* (commissioned by Monstrous Regiment from the American playwright Susan Yankowitz and directed by Penny Cherns) proved a strident and heavyhanded updating of the Cassandra myth as a "surreal thriller," the staging of the piece amid suggestive metal constructs and large jars containing stillborn babes was ominous indeed. The acting, especially by deep-throated Mary McCusker as an obstetrician/doomsayer named for the Trojan prophetess, was electric. And Yankowitz, when she isn't sounding like a cross between Euripides and Sylvia Plath, buttresses her pseudo-poetic treatment with some deft complexities: one of the piece's villains is a tarted-up female espionage agent who prefers to spy on men, the better to flex her wiles; and the fanatical Cassandra does inadvertently play into the hands of her enemies, who include both the blatantly evil "Mr. Deal" and the more seductively insidious Dr. Ap (for Apollo), who is her lover.

The festival's other fullscale production was that of the amiable *Patience and Sarah* by New York's WOW Cafe (the show is soon to reopen in New York at Women's Interart). Adapted by Isabel Miller from her novel, the piece is based on the life of 19th-century painter Mary Ann Wilson and her companion, a farmer named Miss Brundage, with whom she shared a life in Greene County, New York, long before lesbianism was chic. The novel and the play present "a possible account of how they met, overcame religious and family limitations, and set off to build a life together in the frontier." As directed by Lois Weaver of Split Britches, and enacted by the sophisticated Weaver and eager Peggy Shaw in the title roles, the play — presented as a sort of docudrama, with characters moving scenery and plot along via narration — is rife with a sweetness whose edge is cut by irony. Muses Patience's father on the subject of his daughter (the Mary Ann Wilson figure), "How could someone with all that go stand to be a woman?" But Patience can not only stand to be a woman; she wants to bed one — and local farm brat Sarah Dowling, who on their first meeting invites the older woman to feel her bulging muscle, fits the bill. Miller mines much humor from Sarah's gawkiness (it helps that WOW's Peggy Shaw, when imprisoned in a dress, appears to be in drag); having been raised like a boy by a father who had only daughters and chose the strongest for his "son," she tries to impress her lover with her mannishness. But as Patience remarks, shaking her head, "When one chooses a woman to go away with, it's because a woman is what's preferred." (Thunderous cheers from audience.)

Patience and Sarah succeeds insofar as it evinces a humor warmer than P&S's open-bodied love scenes — and because it's nigh impossible, in the midst of all the period Bible thumping and patriarchal malarkey, not to root for the one relationship on view that's not grim and repressed. (Sarah, disguised as a boy, does go on a bit of an odyssey where she meets a goodhearted if defrocked "parson" who lusts after her in a mentorish manner, but his discovery that she's a woman nips that.) A good hard look at the life of Patience's brother's wife, the tightlipped if dutiful Martha, who's always pregnant and slaving, with one foot poised over the grave of

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