

The feminist debate is enhanced by shipwreck

BEING cast away on a desert island and beginning afresh is an attractive notion and it must be the starting point of countless novels and plays.

The Salberg is transformed into every child's painting of a lonely island, garish and raw, but with the incongruous touch of an ornate chair stranded beside a rock.

Advance publicity for *The Colony Comes a Cropper* is nothing if not intriguing. The idea of a collaboration between an obscure French eighteenth century literary curiosity by Marivaux and a political fable by an Australian feminist comedian, Robyn Archer, is certainly innovative.

The result is a strange, provoking, often entertaining evening, which says nothing new but possibly makes you look at things afresh.

The first act was apparently never performed at the time. Al-

The Colony Comes a Cropper, Salberg



though it might have created an uproar in 1750 if it had been, the arguments about women's equality appear tame to us now, and the resolution of them — men playing on women's fear of physical danger to establish superiority — is a foregone conclusion.

Monstrous Regiment give a stylish version of a fairly wordy, static hour, boosted by some exuberant music, deft use of masks and vivid characterisation, particularly from Lynne Verrall as Arthenice.

Robyn Archer's lively sequel takes up the story, but pitches her characters 200 years forward in time.

Thus Nora Connolly's Madame Sorbin (strident, revolutionary

Madame Defarge look-alike) becomes Mrs Swingbin in tight black mini-skirt and Carlene Reed's love lorn, rather wet Persinet has a sex change and transforms into Pearce, a stunningly beautiful 'Diana of the Jungle' with lesbian leanings.

The debate continues, the men try trickery again and this time the day is saved by ... (won't spoil it by telling you if it is the female chippy (attractive performance by Angela Clerkin), or the liberal male in drag or Lady Arty Nicey's roster and refined accent.

The second act is more energetic than the first and the end is surprisingly moving. The arguments may be old hat, but Robyn Archer's view of them is comically wry.

Incidentally, there is a small collection of fascinating sketches by designer Jenny Carey outside the Salberg — well worth a close look.

Vanessa Coryndon

Subtle skirmishes in the battle of the sexes

MONSTROUS REGIMENT, the woman-centred theatre company from London, displays two versions of the battle of the sexes in "The Colony Comes A Cropper" at the Salisbury Playhouse until Saturday.

The first battle is a one-act perspective on women's emancipation written in 1750 by Mari-vaux. It describes the efforts of female members of a colony, stranded on a desert island, to take part in setting up their new society.

When the men refuse to allow them a voice in the assembly, the women vow to separate from men forever and set off on their own.

The fact that the men resort to low trickery to bring the women back leaves the audience eager for justice in the second act, "Comes A Cropper," which is set in modern-ish time and written by Robyn Archer, author of the long-running West End show, "A Star is Torn."

The same actors take on parallel identities to their 18th century characters in a pantomime-like continuation of the fight for equal rights. But the second act is disappointingly heavy-handed.

The women's passionate demands for a voice in the running of their new society are overtaken by schemes to "ensure the future of the race."

The fact that one of the two eligible women is a confirmed lesbian, who is more interested in what lies beyond the horizon than a "duty" to her race, throws a spanner into the works.

It also provides this young woman, Lina (Angela Clerkin), with the opportunity for some rather vague monologues about thinking for herself and being true to her ideals. But as the play rushes to a conclusion, these ideals become blurred by references to global warming, the decadence of life in South-

East England and football hooliganism. The audience is left smiling and slightly bewildered as the characters sail off into the moonlight.

The second act is particularly disappointing, as it is apparent that Monstrous Regiment would be well up to a piece of much greater wit and subtlety.

The actors tackle both graceful tableaux in the first act and slapstick in the second with relish and director Nona Sheppard brings out the subtle connections between past and "present."

One interesting aspect of the first act is that the women's solidarity is destroyed by class differences, their chance to legislate is spoiled because they cannot agree.

And the rather obvious need for reproduction in the new society is not mentioned when they plan to go off on their own, though that may have been considered too indelicate for its day.

Jenny Carey's sparse set is imaginative and Lindsay Cooper's distinctive music creates different moods in an instant.

"The Colony Comes a Cropper" runs through to October 6th.

Salisbury/touring

Michael Martin

The Colony Comes A Cropper

MARIVAUX'S neglected one-act play, *The Colony* (written in the mid-18th century but not performed until 1929, and given its British premiere only two years ago), depicts a community forced after a shipwreck to establish a new state on a desert island, and traces the eventually unsuccessful attempts of the women to ensure that their rights are reflected in the new constitution.

In Monstrous Regiment's production, it is complemented by an especially commissioned sequel by Robyn Archer, which picks up the story two centuries on with the women still awaiting justice, and shows how, following the lead given by the youngest of their number, they are brought to a recognition of the necessity of shaping their own destiny.

It is a neat idea, but in the event an imperfectly balanced

pairing. Archer's play is an effective piece of rumbustious near farce which cleverly bares its political teeth when you least expect it. But Marivaux's is an altogether more subtle affair, exuberantly comic and rich in persuasive early feminist common sense certainly, but also offering a rather more ambiguous and highly perceptive satire of social attitudes, political strategy and the democratic process.

Both the director, Nona Shephard, and her cast are too obviously more at home with Archer than with Marivaux. After the interval we are treated to a pacy piece of cartoonlike theatre, enlivened by excellent one-dimensional portraits from Lynne Verrall and Nora Connolly, and punctuated by moments of stillness that throw into relief the "message", propounded with tellingly contrasted calm and assurance by Angela Clerkin.

Awkwardly pitched and uncertain in tone meanwhile, the first half does not fully exploit either the superficial absurdity of Marivaux's characters, or the underlying seriousness of their dramatic function.

● At Salisbury Playhouse Studio (0722 20333), until October 6, then on tour.

THE COLONY COMES A CROPPER

written by Marivaux (translated by Gillian Hanna) and Robyn Archer, directed by Nona Shepperd, designed by Jenny Carey, music by Lindsay Cooper, presented by Salisbury Playhouse with Monstrous Regiment. (Battersea Arts Centre)

It would be easy to say this Colony comes a Cropper – but that would not exactly be true. Monstrous Regiment who continue to bravely push the women's boat out, where, even today – or most especially today in so-called post-feminist Britain – others may fear to tread, almost have a hit on their hand, but not quite. Their latest offering carries all the hallmarks of their irrepressible spirits – delightful and talented performances, zippy production, a subject that tingles with bon mots and contemporary muscle, yet a final denouement that fades away as might one of those zephyr breezes wafting around Jenny Carey's clever, desert island set. Though they may seem worlds apart, Marivaux's playful, if undermining assertion of women's rights (in this version, the class division undoes for the sisterhood in the end) finds a kind of rebellious, counterblast in Robyn Archer's delicately dyke vision of salvation. It's all jolly good fun, and really quite clever, but somehow Archer's equivalent isn't quite tight enough. Still, Nona Sheppard, inventive as ever, draws out some gorgeous moments – particularly with Lynne Verrall's plum-mouthed aristo, and Carlene Reed in a variety of

guises. Her latter-day, power-hungry 'Top Girl' is spot on and worth the trip alone. CAROLE WODDIS

NOV 15 - NOV 22 1990 CITY LIMITS

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TAYLORS

Marivaux's *The Colony*, in its earlier three-act, full length form, *The New Colony Of The League Of Women*, was such an unmitigated disaster that its embarrassed author destroyed the manuscript and abandoned his idea of writing a piece about what must have been, even in 1729, a hoary old subject, the Battle of the Sexes. Two decades later, however, he returned to the subject. Utilising ideas from the earlier piece he penned a shorter, one-act comedy which caused as much confusion as its progenitor had provoked consternation. Though Marivaux didn't bin this later work, it abruptly disappeared from sight, remaining ignored and unperformed until the early part of this century. Now, at last, it is given the long overdue attention which, on the strength of Nona Shepherd's production for *Monstrous Regiment*, it clearly deserves.

Shepherd and translator Gillian Hanna approach the measured formalism of Marivaux's text with a healthy, tongue-in-cheek brio, prefacing it with a comic dumb show (to Lindsay Cooper's pastiche Michael Nyman soundtrack) in which lovers – commoner and aristocrat, husband and wife, beau and belle alike – are relentlessly pursued and wooed. The pleasure, they seem to be telling us, is in the pursuit

Sex Wars

THE COLONY COMES A CROPPER!
Battersea Arts Centre

rather than the capture, for to be captured by Cupid is to be trapped by supposed gender inequalities which reduce, 'love to a nonsense and marriage to a slavery to be abolished'. Shipwrecked literally and metaphorically, the women – led by Nona Connolly's spunky Madame Sorbin and Lynne Verrall's elegantly combative Arthenice – confront this sorry state of affairs by threatening irrevocable separation from their unscrupulous menfolk if they don't mend the error of their phallogocentric ways. No more, they argue, will the complaint that, 'It's all men, men and never women!' be heard.

Two hundred years later, Robyn Archer echoes their clairon call with *Comes A Cropper!*, a belated second act completion to *The Colony* which takes an effortless, pugilistic swipe at Marivaux's desert-island whimsy – 'perfect resort stuff with the right kind of management' – in offering modern characters who less reticently confront, or, in the case of lesbian couple

Lina (Angela Clerkin) and Pearce (Carlene Reed), refute outright the monolithic power structures of a man made, man-ruled world.

Archer's rumbustious farce proves itself to be the perfect companion piece to Gillian Hanna's wonderfully accessible translation of Marivaux, although she is recognisably on surer ground with Archer's abrasive comedy than the witty delicacy of Marivaux. Shepherd stimulates her company towards a stronger playing style as the piece is driven forward by a cartoon-like energy on Jenny Carey's cheekily designed set, with performances to match. Quality stuff all round, though I suspect the Marivaux will be even better once the company settles into it. There is space within the text to concentrate on its content rather than the technical demands of its surface style. A minor quibble, for this is work of the merit one has come to expect from the always exciting *Monstrous Regiment*, who couldn't be celebrating their fifteenth anniversary with any clearer demonstration of how far they have come and how much they have still to offer. A beautifully achieved evening's entertainment. (See Fringe)

MICHAEL QUINN



Lynne Verrall and Nora Connolly in *THE COLONY COMES A CROPPER!*

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PRESS CUTTINGS



THE COLONY COMES A CROPPER

In Marivaux's eighteenth-century comedy the female members of a shipwrecked colony, isolated from the constraints of external legislations, declare their right to participate in the drawing up of a new constitution. But the newly-formed union of women is swiftly subverted by male subterfuge, which cunningly drives the wedge of social class between the bourgeois and the aristocracy. Monstrous Regiment's production of *The Colony*, translated by Gillian Hanna and directed by Nona Shepphard, gives a straightforward account of this early feminist tract with a sting in its tail, and appends a specially commissioned update by Australian cabaret artist Robyn Archer. Over 200 years later her characters are still stranded, but this robust, more physical sequel ends optimistically as the previously antagonistic women row, in unison, towards an emancipated future.

Louise Kingsley
Battersea Arts Centre, SW11 (071-223 2223). BR Clapham Junction.
Wed-Sun 8.00. To 25 Nov.



THE INDEPENDENT

Wednesday 14 November 1990

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● ARTS

*Aileen Cahill tracks down Monstrous Regiment's
The Colony & Comes A Cropper!*

The high coast of living

It's courageous of Monstrous Regiment to twin plays separated in time by 260 years.

trimmings of the new Age of Reason. That's republican constitutions and all.

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The high coast of living

It's courageous of Monstrous Regiment to twin plays separated in time by 260 years.

You can see the join here, between French comic Marivaux of 1729 and Australian Robyn Archer's lesbian follow-up—which is part of the fun. And there's only the odd stretch-mark to show.

SHAKEN

The Colony is a cocktail of a pro-feminist **Tempest** desert island, stirred with Aristophanes' **Lysistrata**.

Typical of Marivaux's provocative court comedies, the male supremacist world is shaken upside down. A duo, of grande dame and her maid, demand to rule this Pacific island Utopia against the men, with all the tricks, treats and

trimmings of the new Age of Reason. That's republican constitutions and all.

MISCHIEVOUS

The pair are played by a stylish, commanding Lynne Verrall, and a shrewd, lively Nora Connolly. While a very unreconstructed daughter, pert Angela Clerkin, falls for bimboesque courtship with sub/domination of fashionable manners.

And it's here that Nona Shepphard's mischievous direction subverts the classic original. The courtly lover is a woman, a "breeches" part, played with the strength and grace of a tennis court diva, by Carlene Reed, to hilarious, pantomimic effect.

That leaves the trio of men, duped but still trying, and per-

formed with a true Nineties "Carry On" gusto. They go through a second-half transformation in Robyn Archer's carry-through to today, **Comes a Cropper!** And become yobbo executive, Alf-Garnett type husband and "new man" wannabe seducer.

ECCENTRIC

The two lovers somersault to celebratory lesbianism and the shocked mothers to further survival tactics. There's a neat unravelling of its classic predecessor and an escape finale in a fabulous, DIY boat.

But the writing doesn't strike out to new discoveries and the evening is an enjoyable return match, if eccentric, to what Monstrous Regiment and others performed when the



Lynne Verrall as the lady with maid, Nora Connolly, are washed all up in Monstrous Regiment's The Colony

company was a healthy baby. Pantomime scenes, particularly a scrappy, over-extended chase, need slimming down.

Robyn Archer's wit has neither the sharpness of Australian detail nor any of the on-the-nail satire which this sketchy material really demands. And why the borrowings from Aristophanes?

When I saw the play in

Hilderstone, near Broadstairs, the audience demanded encores and this remote Kentish venue should be applauded for booking it.

The Colony and Comes a Cropper! takes the odd tumble but jumps through enough hoops for a bright evening.

At the Battersea Arts Centre, 7-25 November, Wed-Sun, 8pm. Booking 071 223 2223.