

# MONSTROUS REGIMENT

## Sketches from life

*A Common Woman*  
Half Moon Theatre  
Alex Renton

SET AT the point where reality and ideology rub up against each other, Franca Rame and Dario Fo's monologues are vivid, concise and entertaining comments on the female condition, the like of which no British feminist writer has been able to provide. Comic-but-angry, raw-but-precise, the sketches are rooted in an Italian tradition of working-class radical theatre entirely absent in this country. Since a selection was published here in 1981, they have had a keen and captive market in university and touring companies.

Gillian Hanna, an old hand with Rame and Fo's work, performs in her own translation three rather more difficult pieces from the original collection, *Tutta casa, letto e chiesa* (best translated in the German tag *Kinder, Küche und Kirche*). The first, most characteristic sketch, has a rumbustious bag-lady wander into a Dublin church, light a joint from the devotional candles, and proceed, under the familiar monologist's pretext of making her confession, to tell us the story of her life.

She is an O'Caseyish matriarch, full of bluster and good-hearted rebellion, who has undergone a conversion while on the road looking for an errant son. She had marched with Sinn Fein (consumed with embarrassment should anyone from her local Labour Party branch see her), organised a housewives' rebellion, been jailed.

By the time she had dressed herself in an Afghan coat and joined a commune, the search was over: the housewife had (turning on, dropping out) found herself. When her son rolled up in a good job and a suit to rescue her she didn't want to know. What seems rather an old-fashioned piece of counter-culture wishful-thinking



Gillian Hanna in *A Common Woman*

finally becomes a comment on the relationship between church and state: the play closes as the police, alerted by her confessor, come to arrest her. Hanna, with great gusto and scabrous visual detail, brings the character alive. In her clever transposition, the story is entertaining, though you suspect its resonance might have been stronger in mid-Seventies Italy.

Another last-minute plot twist gives a point, rather too late, to the third piece, a broad and bawdy comedy called *Coming Home*. Here Hanna dresses up in Lycra trousers and a pink top as Tracey Rogers of Peckham, out for a day on the town to punish her husband who, the night before, managed 21 seconds and then fell asleep. Tracey's revenge is an unsatisfying afternoon in a seedy hotel with Horace from the office. The greater success of a

third encounter makes the point that men are to be used, not served, and that it is dependence on them that has made Tracey's life a farce.

Reaction to this slight comedy was muted, entirely because of the preceding piece. *The Rape* has Hanna sitting tight on a chair, under a spotlight rather as though under some benign interrogation. She recounts with controlled emotion how a group of men tortured her with cigarettes, removed her clothes with a razorblade, and then proceeded to rape her in turn. This horrific narration provides one of those rare theatrical events so naturally and intensely dramatic that it needs no physical drama. It's also a hard act to follow.

☐ *Continues until 4 March at the Half Moon (Box office: 01-709 1141).*

THE INDEPENDENT Friday 10 February 1989

Registered in England number 1332483  
Registered Office: 49 South Molton Street London W1Y 1HE  
Charity number 274517  
Directors: Ms C Bowler, Ms S J Bailey  
Ms G L Hanna, Ms M McCusker

## Half Moon

Betty Caplan

### **A Common Woman**

A COMMON WOMAN unites three one-woman plays written by the irrepressible Italian duo Franca Rame and Dario Fo. Gillian Hanna, founding member of Monstrous Regiment, which presents these plays in association with the Half Moon, performs the works she has herself translated and transposed to a more familiar idiom.

"Bless Me Father for I have Sinned", whose flamboyantly heretical heroine exudes a peculiarly Irish theatricality, is set in a church in Dublin in the early 70s. Having escaped from the clutches of her family, she foolishly imagines the Church to be a place of sanctity and the Holy Father to be a friend. The idea of the confessional thus becomes a neat device for structuring the tale of a woman who is a monument to the kind of vitality unfailingly bred by repressively religious societies. By their rebelliousness shall ye know them. Hung about with beads, scarves and other relics of the hippy era, she teaches the Father how it feels to be the mother of a Republican extremist and the wife of a man reduced to children's TV and neurotic attacks of "azma".

"The Rape" is set, as the programme note tells us, "anywhere, anytime". Recounting this incident based on Franca Rame's own experience with a fascist gang, Ms Hanna adopts a bloodless tone and manner of delivery which is in itself testimony of the violence done to her.

"Coming Home" sees the versatile Ms Hanna transformed into a woman who measures her anger on a pocket rage calculator and leaves her bestial spouse determined to get revenge on the 21 second spasm which in his book goes by the name of making love. She is a cross between the canine and

GUARDIAN 11TH FEB 1989.

# MONSTROUS REGIMENT

## HALF MOON A Common Woman

THREE COMMON women in fact in three highly uncommon one-woman plays by Dario Fo and Franca Rame. The middle play is a concentrated, moving piece – The Rape – based on Franca Rame's own experience when kidnapped by a Fascist gang.

Gillian Hanna in a solo spot portrays the raped woman in a neutral voice as if at some distance from her terrifying treatment at the hands of three ruffians. In fact the main thought in the woman's mind is to turn off all feelings as if they were a tap. The physical details – even her hair feels as if it is burning – are delivered deadpan as if for all the world it were some gruesome doctor's report. But the cumulative intensity is hypnotic. Pin-dropping stuff.

In the other two pieces the familiar

high-grade Fo/Rame humour is much in evidence as Hanna, in Dublin, enters a church complete with capacious travelling bag as if in search of a resting place and lights a cigarette at an altar candle. Spotting the confessional she pops into it and immediately starts confessing like mad. She has run away from her asthmatic husband and drug scene son, been arrested on numerous occasions and when called to order by the priest affirms that order has nothing to do with love.

The third play, well directed (Sharon Miller) and with a set that marvellously discovers itself as Kings Cross station and hotel bedroom (Andrea Montag) concerns a woman who rows with her husband and leaves home for a day on the town. Hanna, in splendid form makes the fatal mistake that is truly the stuff of farce.

Paul Chand

THE STAGE and TELEVISION TODAY, February 23, 1989

Monstrous Regiment Limited  
123 Tottenham Court Road London W1P 9HN  
Telephone: 01-387 4790  
Registered in England number 1332483  
Registered Office: 49 South Molton Street London W1Y 1HE  
Charity number 274517  
Directors: Ms C Bowler Ms S J Bailey  
Ms G L Hanna, Ms M McCusker



## 'A Common Woman'

### *Half Moon*

Escaping domestic servitude to enjoy free love; the assault on body and spirit of a gang rape; the joys and vicissitudes of a day and a night on the razzle; these might not seem like the common experience of most women, but in the skilful hands of Gillian Hanna who also translates Franca Rame and Dario Fo's sparkling trilogy of plays, this becomes the dramatic stuff of women's lives. Ingeniously Hanna resets the first play, 'Bless Me Father', in an incense-filled Dublin church where a bag-lady, dressed in smock and beads, enters ostensibly to tell her confession. Lighting a fag from a candle, drinking coffee and dipping into the Kama Sutra, she regales us with how she broke her humdrum domestic routine to become a hippy heroine. In stark contrast, the next piece, which is based on Franca Rame's experience of gang rape by fascists, recounts in chilling circumstantial detail how thugs systematically raped a woman. 'I want to drown in the chaos inside my head,' is her heart-rending peroration. The final and the most consummately theatrical of the tales, relates how Trudy of Peckham enacted revenge on a husband for his puny 21 seconds love-making. In a rich and versatile performance which combines technical virtuosity with great depth and feeling, Gillian Hanna unfurls a mesmerising triptych of women's experience. This one woman show which is produced by the Half Moon and Monstrous Regiment with the Sheffield Crucible, is one of two productions (for the other see 'Island Life' below) which the versatile Monstrous Regiment are currently playing in London. Do see it.

*Ann McFerran*

# AN ORIGINAL VIEW OF THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT

DARIO Fo (the author of 'Accidental Death of an Anarchist') and Franca Rame, two highly-acclaimed Italian actor-writers, have collaborated on a trio of plays 'A Common Woman'.

Fo and Rame are noted for their subversive political material, and 'A Common Woman' does not fail to be just that.

The plays depict the dilemmas facing women today. Set in the 1970s, 'Bless Me Father', the first of the three short plays, highlights how the 'women's liberation movement' affects the life of an Irish Catholic wife and mother.

She has all the appearance of a 'designer hippy', as she sits knitting, legs apart. In a deserted church she confesses: 'As a wife and mother I'm not exactly a picture of virtue.'

This is a shattering statement, which questions the very basis of the religious image of Mary the mother of Christ as a picture of saintly innocence and virtue.

## Confronts

The woman confronts the priest with her experience of the ordeal of being a young woman, running with a street march in high heels, and telling of how, animal-like, she bit a policeman's ear as he tried to snatch her son. The 'maternal instinct' can now be seen as lethal weapon to anyone who intervenes between a mother and her son.

Due to Franca Rame's high political profile she was kidnapped and raped

'A Common Woman', by Dario Fo and Franca Rame. Translated and performed by Gillian Hanna. Presented by Monstrous Regiment at the Half Moon Theatre, Mile End Road, London E1 (Stepney Green tube), until March 4th.

## REVIEW BY RUTH GREGORY

by a fascist gang. That experience lies behind her monologue 'The Rape.'

The confusion and appalling violence to which she was subjected, the degradation of being so systematically abused - all was harrowingly revealed.

## Attitude

She tells us of the unsympathetic attitude of the police, reflecting the still-disturbing view that rape is not a serious crime and is basically a 'woman's problem'.

Handled with the sensitivity the topic deserves 'The Rape' was the most striking of the three plays.

By contrast, 'Coming Home' was the funniest: clad in lurex leggings and stilettoes a wife, fed up with her sexually inept and asthmatic husband leaves home and meets a man she has always disliked, with whom she then spends a day of lust in a seedy hotel - only to return to a now loving husband, or so she thinks.

Gillian Hanna, a founder member of the Monstrous Regiment (the feminist co-operative theatre company) has worked extensively in plays at the Everyman Theatre, Liverpool, and spent several seasons with the 7:84 company.

Gillian Hanna's translation appreciates not only the change of language but also the differing cultures.

'Bless Me Father', origi-

nally set in a time when the Red Brigades marched through the streets of Italy, was successfully transposed to the Catholic state of Eire.

Neither 'Bless Me Father' or 'Coming Home' proved to be hilariously funny, perhaps because of the over-used, all-too-familiar characters.

However, Gillian Hanna provides an alternative and thoughtful view of feminism and its effect on 'ordinary' women and their struggle through the battlefield of 'sexual politics'.

A Common W