

REVIEW

Real life death

**Mourning Pictures,
Monstrous Regiment,
Aston University Centre
for the Arts**

This is essentially the "stage documentary" so much favoured by many of today's socially aware theatre groups.

A play doesn't have to be any the less dramatic for that but its drama has to be the kind that occurs in real life, not the contrived ones of high tragedy or impossible farce.

Mourning Pictures, interpreted in a movingly, matter-of-fact way by the intelligent and enterprising feminist company, *Monstrous Regiment*, must strike a chord of understanding in anyone who has witnessed a beloved

parent's drawn-out and inevitably losing battle with cancer.

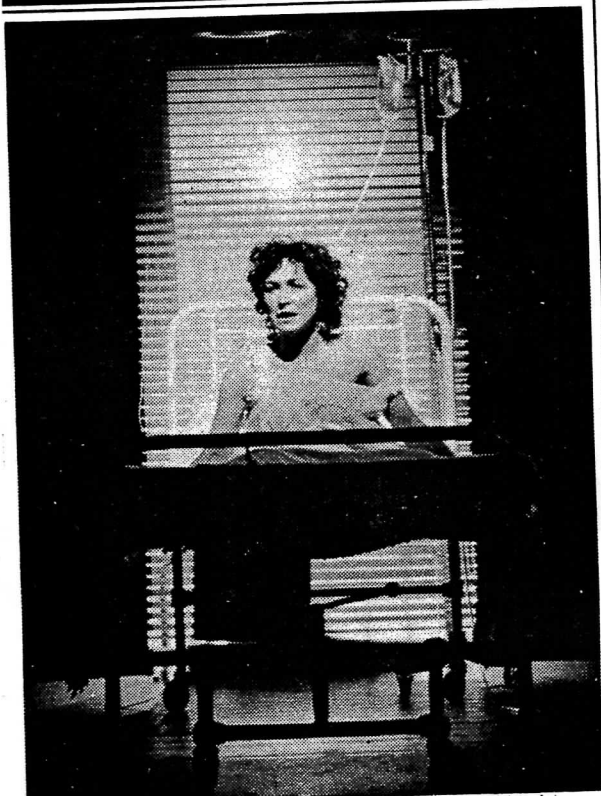
It worked that way for me, on many points.

American writer, Honor Moore, based her play on the story of her mother's struggle against cancer.

It has the ring of truth about it in this production, which stresses the changing relationship between mother and daughter, convincingly played by Aviva Goldkorn and Gillian Hanna.

Unusual percussion music and a kind of keening style of singing, help to emphasise the family's emotions and heighten this tragedy of everyday life.

NORAH LEWIS



Everyone's mother will die, but 'Mourning Pictures' (Tricycle) crystallises the experience of one mother, dying of cancer, gathered in minute observations by her protesting, nonplussed daughter. This third in Monstrous Regiment's season of 'British premieres' is on the face of it the most conventional. A woman attended by expensive doctors and pampered by a loving family dies in undeniable luxury in East Coast America. But any temptation to dismiss the play merely as a lament of the privileged is eclipsed by the spontaneity and sheer force of its outcry against all senseless death. Author Honor Moore chronicles the universal feelings of love and betrayal between mother and daughter. She forces us to look critically at our attitude towards death. Music is effectively used both to create atmosphere and dramatise the play's reflective soliloquies. But the ultimate success of this introspective elegy as drama depends on Monstrous Regiment's no-nonsense magic touch. (Ros Franey)

TimeOut MARCH
13 → 19th

Women's torment

MONSTROUS REGIMENT

Mourning Pictures

HONOR MOORE'S "Mourning Pictures", presented by Monstrous Regiment at the Tricycle, Kilburn, is a remarkably honest and unsentimental picture of the onset of death, wrenched out of personal experience and striking home with a force that will be recognised and physically felt by all those who have watched a loved one suffer a lingering terminal illness.

It offers naught for one's comfort and, being a strongly feminist play, also indicates that in a situation like this, when a mother of nine children is attacked by

cancer just as she is looking forward to a new phase of her life as a writer, daughters will undergo greater mental torment than husbands and sons.

Is this just because the link between mother and daughter is inevitably stronger than that between wife and husband, or simply that women willingly take on a firmer emotional tie? Is it significant that the husband, a clergyman no less, is packed off on a holiday by doctors and daughters as the wife approaches the final stage of her illness because he is looking tired?

Be that as it may, "Mourning Pictures" is a play of extraordinary sensitivity, narrated by the eldest daughter, who lives a free life of her own in New York but who is continually drawn back to her mother's bedside. Gillian Hanna, in a performance pitched perfectly between independence, duty and love, indicates superbly the feelings and attitudes of a woman turned inside out by an unexpected event — the initial shock of the news, the determination to put on a courageous, cheerful face for her mother's sake, the elation when a new treatment looks as if it might be successful, the outbursts of impatient resentment against the interruption to her own life, the final emptiness and guilt as her mother slips away.

Painfully truthful and factual, the play is finely directed by Penny Cherno; there is an effective musical score by Tony Haynes; Chris Bowler and Aviva Golkorn are the pick of the supporting performers and there is some striking singing by Josefina Cupido.

Peter Hepple

THE STAGE

OBSERVER REVIEW

Sunday 15 March 1981

An anatomy of death

VICTORIA RADIN on Honor Moore's 'Mourning Pictures.'

I HAVE just been through a harrowing night after watching *Mourning Pictures* (Kilburn Tricycle). Honor Moore's play is about the death of her mother from cancer. It stirs up powerful emotions in anyone who has been through a similar experience. But I am not sure if it re-orders those emotions in a way that justifies its subject-matter.

We meet the mother and daughter as mother imparts the news of her forthcoming operation. The play then takes us on a relentless journey to her despair at the prognosis, her bouts of paranoia and anger, the return of her personality with the hope conferred by a nature-cure, and finally to the ugly decline. It is a detailed anatomy of death, or dying, in that modern, spectacularly degrading form of cancer.

Moore is an American poet, and the subject first suggested itself as a cycle of poems. The poetry is present in the play, particularly in the songs — set in this production by Tony Haynes to a variety of instruments and sung by the actresses and a wonderful musician called Josefina Cupido in a weird, wailing style. They make a haunting and leavening back-drop to the purposeful detailing of disease.

Moore is honest — perhaps too honest. When her mother telephones to give her that first bad news, what the daughter (who is 27) concentrates her mind upon is herself. This is in part a story of evasion — in particular, that selfish writer's prevarication which finds one at the writing desk or studying one's own reactions to the tiles on the waiting-room floor at the critical moment. Yet within

the play is a refusal to transmute its catalogue of decay into terms that go beyond the outrage of death.

The play is also short on humour — I do not think Moore views her untimely introspection with irony — and its style continues the tradition of American poetic female diction in drama, which translates female experience into archetypes, as if the goal of feminism was to lose one's particularity.

Penny Cherns, directing for Monstrous Regiment, has wisely decided to render the play into English accents (the poetry is slightly flattened, but we gain in immediacy) and to cast as the mother Aviva Goldkorn, no older than Gillian Hanna's Daughter and as vulnerable. Goldkorn's is a very moving, low-key portrait of a struggle against the depersonalisation of death.

THE TIMES

Mourning Pictures

Tricycle

Ned Chaillet

Cancer is an epidemic, is the present-day plague. Few lives are untouched by it, but it does not make for easy art and the rare, popular drama that has explored it, such as *The Shadow Box* which has been turned into a television film by Paul Newman, usually keeps the pain at a distance and concentrates on the emotional trauma. That is understandable, although it is a false picture since the pain is central.

Honor Moore's play, *Mourning Pictures*, is about the pain and could be harrowing, both in the Christian sense of a delivery from hell and the more ordinary sense of distressing. It fails because the pain is poetically misplaced twice over. Miss Moore, herself a poet, is writing autobiographically, from the vantage point of a daughter recording her mother's suffering and death, but there is a haze of confusion. The daughter in the play identifies so strongly with the mother that she takes the suffering on herself as far as she is able, and the actress in the part makes more of the daughter's fatigue than is shown of the mother's suffering.

There is a further distance added in Monstrous Regiment's production, now at Tricycle Theatre. The daughter's poetic addresses to the audience have

been given a musical backing which seems to have the purpose of lessening the intensity of the story. Gillian Hanna stops speaking as the daughter so that Josefina Cupido can continue her thoughts with a song and that moves the story into an artiness that contradicts the clinical directness of the production.

Yet there is much of value in the play, particularly in the carefully-wrought language which Miss Moore uses to describe the feelings of her characters, and in the descriptions of the "cancer underground", the non-medical cures which the mother tries in her fight. The play, which is American, transcends the local and the private because of its poetic dimensions, and because it does not ever see the cancer as necessarily triumphant. There are miraculous cures and the fight to survive is always heroic.

The production by Penny Cherns could be less cluttered, but it has strengths in its imagery, with characters stepping into the story from behind venetian blinds that define the sickroom. Even the music, when it is not elevated to song, has value, nagging away in the summer nights like crickets at dusk.

MONSTROUS REGIMENT

plays and players

by colin chambers

A picture of death

COMPLETING an adventurous and exciting season of premiering in Britain feminist plays from abroad, Monstrous Regiment is touring a chilling account of a mother dying, written by American author Honor Moore.

Whatever your reaction may be to the way in which the writer portrays the dying process, *Mourning Pictures* (now at Wakefield Tricycle) is also a powerful statement about America — and "western" values and images in general.

A mourning picture was an art form popular in the early 19th century, stitched or painted by young women as gifts for a bereaved family, and usually showing a graveside scene.

In this picture we are shown fragments from the last six months in the life of Maggie who is diagnosed as having cancer.

But the play is not about how

she comes to terms with it and the different treatments, including homeopathic cures, that in the end all fail to work.

It is about the whole family, presented through their eyes, but mainly through one of the daughters, Margaret.

Using various theatrical forms — song, music, monologue — Margaret begins to discover herself and question what she finds: what does "I love you" mean? What do we believe in, how and why?

In this most basic of acts — dying — Margaret sees herself in her mother. She has the same name, and one day she will die. But what makes life go on?

What is being a daughter or a woman? The questions go on, and the play, strongly presented by the excellent company under Penny Cherns' direction, reflects this exploration in its own style.

MORNING STAR

Monstrous Regiment Limited
4 Elder Street London E1 6BT
Telephone: 01-247 2398

Registered in England number 1332483
Registered Office: 49 South Molton Street London W1Y 1HE
Charity number 274517

Directors: Ms C Bowler, Ms J Cupido, Mr G Gars de
Ms G L Hanna, Ms M McCusker, Mr J Slade

THE

NEW STANDARD

Monday, March 16, 1981.

Trial by pain

FOR MOST of a year, between March and September, a daughter watches her mother dying of cancer. She cries out in despair: "Why do these terrible things happen to the people you love?"

Mourning Pictures is the play which the daughter, Honor Moore, made out of this long dying. Produced by the feminist theatre group Monstrous Regiment, at the Tricycle Theatre, it is an extremely gruelling and morbid bedside story.

The mother goes into hospital for deep surgery. Weak and in pain she comes home to her family, and recovers strength and hope on a diet of vitamins and vegetable juices. The reprieve is a brief one. The cancer reasserts it-

self and she goes back into hospital to die.

If Mourning Pictures had been an English play, it would probably have had a leavening of humour to set the everyday tragedy in sharper perspective. But Honor Moore is American — more than that, an American who writes poetry — and her sombre contemplation of her mother's death is expressed with an unremitting painful sincerity.

Each fleeting emotion of grief, love, guilt and pity is scrutinised as intently as her mother's cancer is scrutinised by the doctors in attendance.

Penny Cherns, the director, tries to lighten the atmosphere by giving the doctors, all played by David Bradford, exaggerated accents and mannerisms. It certainly helps. So does Aviva Goldkorn's effectively understated performance as the mother, the only natural person around.

Christopher Hudson

MONSTROUS REGIMENT

MOURNING PICTURES

Monstrous Regiment

Tricycle Theatre, London

A play which is an autobiographical account of the death of a mother by cancer cannot fail to move and disturb, and the audience did leave in a traumatised state. Honor Moore has written into this piece, (largely through her portrayal of Maggie, the doomed mother and Margaret, her namesake significantly and her eldest daughter), those stages of reaction to serious illness and imminent death that, when they inevitably come upon us, shock and profoundly disturb.

Margaret's original reluctance, even refusal, to become involved with her parent's dilemma, her subsequent (and even more so her sister Abigail's) obsession with the

mother's sickness, the reaction to and frustration over the impossibility of doing enough ever for the sick person, the utter exhaustion, the bouts of anger with the invalid, followed by the guilt, are all revealed. Maggie, the mother's courage, but also her terror and her anger, reasonably directed to the unfairness of the illness but often directed towards her loving but tired family, all these points and stages were well and tellingly drawn.

The therapy of the alternative medical cure, with its absurdities, and its possibly helpful, time and energy consuming regimes, the suddenly accelerating decline of the mother, the repulsion, pity and confusion evoked by her condition, and finally Margaret's inability to deal with her mother's actual death in spite of months of preparation, all were carefully and clearly presented, almost in pageant-like form by the Monstrous Regiment Collective

While I liked the way the production focussed upon the dying woman, intensely and beautifully played by Aviva Goldkorn, it was at those points in both the play and the production where we were pulled away from that focus that the tension faltered, and even gave way to embarrassment. The move into the poetical and the musical didn't work for me. Josefina Cupido's sincerity and poignancy in performance, enjoyed in the past, seemed out of place, intrusive, here.

The idiom of the instrumental music seemed inappropriate, the acting mannered at these points. Even so, had I seen this play before my own mother's illness and death I would have been helped to deal with myself. I wish that

Honor Moore, or someone else, could place these human events into an overtly political, feminist construct. How else can we learn to make political meaning out of these most personally probing happenings?
Norma Pitfield

SPARE PART

a women's liberation
magazine

Issue 106 May 1981

Monstrous Regiment Limited

4 Elder Street London E1 6BT

Telephone: 01-247 2398

Registered in England number 1332483

Registered Office: 49 South Molton Street London W1Y 1HE

Charity number 274517

Directors: Ms C Bowler, Ms J Cupido, Mr G Garside

Ms G L Hanna, Ms M McCusker, Mr J Slade

Mourning pictures

by Veronica Grocock

Watching the slow death of a loved one is surely the ultimate test of human endurance. Trying to convey this experience in dramatic form is fraught with difficulties: how to achieve a balance between empathy and neutrality. The sphere of human emotions is extremely volatile, and a delicately understated approach often elicits greater impact than the unflinching assault.

The latter treatment predominates in *Mourning Pictures*, Monday's Radio 4 adaptation of Honor Moore's harrowing stage play about a daughter confronting her mother's death from cancer. This production, featuring the feminist theatre company Monstrous Regiment, is part of the current nationwide 'Women Live' festival, a celebration of women's achievements in all areas of the arts and entertainment.

The theme is autobiographi-

cal, drawn from the writer's parallel experience of her mother's terminal illness. A journal kept during the final six months became the basis for *Mourning Pictures*. It is, as such, a kind of personal exorcism, about growing up and coming to terms with one's own mortality. It is also about anger and selfishness, honestly and openly expressed, reversing traditional expectations of female duty, love and self-sacrifice. To admit to feelings of anger towards one's dying mother takes a certain courage.

None the less, too much subjectivity risks lapsing into self-indulgence, detracting from the play's dramatic effect. There are times when the daughter's self-obsessed identification with her mother's suffering becomes wearisome.

The most moving moments are the mother's, painfully convincing in their subtle intensity. After surgery she comes home to her family. The brief remission period that follows brings renewed hope before the cancer reappears and she returns to hospital for the last time. Her spirit and determination are

finally broken as she pleads: 'Where are all the miracle cures? I am drugged senseless and alone in a white bed in a small hospital. You have all betrayed me.'

There is an incongruous quality about the doctors' accents, and this provides some much-needed relief. Tony Haynes's music, too, has a leavening effect, counterbalancing the monologues, though the haunting, soaring vocals tend to reinforce the mood of heavy despondency.

It is a profoundly pessimistic piece, but then cancer is a gruelling subject, playing on our deepest fears and anxieties. Its taboo nature makes us reject the reality of its existence, let alone face it head on. Radio accentuates and compresses the situation, thus heightening its shock value.

As Kay Patrick, who produced the play for radio, points out, 'One is so used to the sugared pill. We tend to water down our emotions, and to run away from anything which touches us deeply.' *Mourning Pictures* is less about winning or losing than about the struggle to survive, and it touches a raw nerve.

THE LISTENER 20 MAY 1982

RADIO 4 Stereo 8-9.30pm
Mourning Pictures
 by Honor Moore
 (See feature)

MONDAY

■ Mourning Pictures by Honor Moore with music by Tony Haynes. 8.00-9.30pm Radio 4.

A radio presentation (directed by BBC Manchester producer Kay Patrick) of the March 1981 presentation by Monstrous Regiment. The play is based on the journal Honor Moore kept while her mother died of cancer. The stage play was considered a thoughtful and enterprising piece of theatre. Just how it will translate into radio is another matter. Kay Patrick though is one of the more enlightened radio producers.

Mourning Pictures (8.00-9.30)

Radio 4). A presentation of the stage production by feminist company Monstrous Regiment, based on Honor Moore's journal of her mother's dying days.

THE SUNDAY TIMES, 23 MAY 1982

CITY LIMITS MAY 21-27, 1982

A limited time

We all know we'll die, but the knowledge has a sort of unreality. To be continually aware of death in any very vivid fashion — as may happen if you suddenly fall ill — presents an intolerable prospect: no one can live with that degree of apprehension. And yet the active knowledge of an end to the body may be necessary as an incentive to using the time in between — except that that in turn raises difficult questions about the way in which to use that time and what the enterprise is for in the first place. Asking the questions, we get no answers which is in itself an uncomfortable situation. Either we live with it — which may mean forgetting the problem, opting for hedonism, playing the stoic — or we go for some system of belief which purports to fill the vacuum. Or maybe something of all these, depending on the weather, or the state of the world.

Honor Moore's *Mourning Pictures* entered this area of uncertainty and conveyed in very telling terms one response or collection of responses to the unassailable knowledge of the imminence of death: not sometime, but before the year is out. The play was based on a journal which the writer, an American, had kept while her mother was dying of cancer, charting the sufferer's experience from the first appalled realization that the end was in sight. At that point she rejects chemotherapy with its often distressing side effects, but begins the desperate search for some alternative.

Yet this culminates in a period of optimism, even euphoria: Dr Berryman, with his massive doses of protein and disagreeable but cleansing infusions, takes over the disease appears to be dormant, maybe even in retreat. However, the odd phrase or tone of voices or thing unspoken, sensitively introduced, lets the listener know that the dog is still there, gnawing underneath the skin.

Then there is the family's response — or more accurately, the daughter's, for it

was characteristic and I think a weakness of this play that apart from Margaret and her mother (called Maggie, the names suggesting two aspects of one person) none of the other characters really registered at all. But Margaret registers and nowhere more so than in the sequence where her mother, having asked for appetising food, is too sick to eat it. This provokes not sympathy, but — oh, how recognizable — resentment, an emotion that we see compounded of anguish, exhaustion and disappointment and a touch of "How can you do this to me?" As an account of the continual awareness of death as a physical end, seemingly without mitigation and therefore intolerable, *Mourning Pictures* made quite an impression.

It did so, however, in the face of one or two problems: though plainly the dialogue was American, the performing company, Monstrous Regiment, adopted English accents — an understandable decision, given the known difficulty of reproducing authentic American but the mismatch between voice and phraseology often jarred. I also do not think that in its tone this stage production ever quite acclimatized to radio. And then there were the songs: periodically the cast would turn into a chorus singing, to music by Tony Haynes, meditations on the action of the play.

In another area, that of nuclear war, we live under threat of death and often turn our backs on it because the imagination of it is beyond our grasp or tolerance or both and most of us feel helpless to reduce it anyway. This response is somewhat aggravated when we hear statesmen and strategists discussing such things as "first strike capability" or a policy of "no first use" as did Robert McNamara, former US Secretary of Defense, and Laurence Martin, last year's Reith lecturer, in *Nuclear War and the Atlantic Alliance* (Radio 3, May 22). This balancing the probabilities of megadeath seems unpleasantly calculating in the light of the events to which it refers. Yet, if we set aside the reluctance to listen at all, it's clear that in the absence of anything better somebody had better make these calculations: as McNamara argued forcefully, on whether nuclear powers adopt a policy of "no first use" may depend everybody's survival.

David Wade

Royal Albert Hall,
Reservations 01-589 8212
Monday 7th June, 7.30 p.m.
The Philharmonia Orchestra,
soloists: John Lill (piano), Robert
Cohen (cello), Norman del Mar,
conductor. Walton: "Crown
Imperial"; Elgar: "Cello Concerto";
Mendelssohn: "Hebrides Over-
ture". Tickets £2-£10.