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**THEATRE:** Benedict Nightingale

*The Execution* is also set in Russia, just a little earlier, and concerns the evolution of the radical conscience in the period up to and including the assassination of Alexander II: an event Melissa Murray seems to regard as justified, despite the man's achievements, character and longer-term aims. We aren't to expect Chekhovian ambivalence or complexity of her play. She deals, as he refused to deal, in blacks and whites, or at least reds and whites. And yet her subject has the intrinsic interest, and her narrative the momentum and excitement, to suck us into the story and hold us there for at least half an hour longer than anyone would have expected. It could all indeed be shorter, and almost certainly will be by the time you read this; but the whole is testimony to the still-striking standards of *Monstrous Regiment*, a company whose fundamental feminism is (incidentally) mature enough to be implicit. The women in the play seek, discover, make relationships with men, sacrifice them when they must, offer examples, lead, die, are remembered – and don't need to signal their significance in any theatrical semaphore.

New Statesman 28 May 1982



One is all too rarely able to use the word 'excellent' in theatrical criticism. It is therefore with considerable pleasure that I pronounce the production by Monstrous Regiment of Melissa Murray's new play *The Execution* (ICA) to be precisely that. The whole exercise raises the tone of *Women Live* and proves that consummate theatre ie the perfect marrying of all sensory components, can be collectively achieved.

The script is a skilful blend of realism and literary lyricism in which several threads are twined but none left loose: the political account and analysis of the events leading up to the assassination of Tsar Alexander II of Russia in 1881 is clear and gripping, yet the personal is not neglected. Nor is the account humourless! Beside the obvious examination of early socialism, Murray ranges the experiences of the Russian women who, denied education at home, joined the émigrés in France and Switzerland, and were politicised by such theoreticians as Bakunin and Chernyshevsky. Many of

these women were at the forefront of the movement which led to the assassination of the so-called 'liberal' Tsar by an organization known as The People's Will. Nor were they relegated to secretarial or tea-making jobs! They were theorists and activists. Many were imprisoned and even executed for their beliefs and their actions. I hasten to add that no pre-knowledge of the period is required since the text unobtrusively furnishes such details as are necessary. (Compare *Summit Conference* in the West End wherein the audience is spoon-fed indigestible information about a much better-known period).

What makes the production as special as the play is the total support given the capable com-

pany of five actresses and three actors by the lighting, sound and set designers. Music by Lindsay Cooper is particularly evocative and forms integral bridges between scenes as well as underscoring some of them. Of the performers I must single out for commendation Gillian Hanna, whose sensitive portrayal of Vera Figner was a tour de force of range, energy and emotional sensibility.

*The Execution* is a production which would do credit to any one of our national 'centres of excellence'. In her handling of actors, space and material, Sue Dunderdale proves herself to be one of our finest directors. Hats off, gentlemen and ladies, a playwright, a director, a company. □

ICA

# The Execution

by ROSALIND CARNE

An historical epic may be expected to enlighten us on some aspect of past events. The best of the genre can offer new angles of approach, and stimulate the appetite to learn more. Melissa Murray's 3½ hour endurance test for Monstrous Regiment is very far from the best.

Here we learn that several upper class Russian women studied abroad during the late 19th century. In addition to their official courses they gained a grounding in political theory, and many returned to organise popular resistance to the Tsar. He was assassinated in March 1881 by a group called The People's Will, which included some of these women.

A theatrical form which depends on a succession of loosely related events, culminating in a revolutionary act, makes heavy demands on the writer. It is not enough to have done the research. Some political and philosophical tension, some interplay of ideas, must hold our attention where characterisation and dramatic conflict is superficial.

These Lefties would kill us with talk, relating their life stories, each other's life stories, spilling out unexceptional

rhetoric and familiar maxims with flat conviction. Do Russians really take twice as long to say anything as we do? Their tedious speeches are delivered in very correct, clipped English without the slightest elision to defect from the period foreignness. The peasants, in contrast, burble incomprehensibly in Mummerset.

Gillian Hanna plays Vera, the central figure and, against odds, manages to create an individual of sympathy and depth. The remainder of the cast share a variety of roles with less success. The ruling class are particularly unsatisfactory, a set of highly caricatured twittering idiots, in contrast to the naturalistic if ultra-sober politicians.

Sue Dunderdale directs this relentless march, on a set designed by Gemma Jackson, a piece of slippery parquet which has the difficult task of serving for interiors and exteriors from Zurich to St Petersburg. If you decide to see it, do stay until the end. The final scene, the moments prior to execution are extraordinary, terrifying, and theatrically superior to anything else in this worthy, wordy, saga.

Financial Times Monday May 24 1982

THE EXECUTION  
Monstrous Regiment  
Drill Hall, London

82

The dilemma of Russian middle-class women in the 19th century, denied education in their own country and thus exiled in order to gain it, then subsequently often politicised, is a fascinating subject. Sadly this focus is quickly dissipated in this long and wordy piece. Too much is attempted at break-neck speed, class conflict within revolutionary movements; the dilemma of the judicial powers — whether to crush or accommodate in order to subjugate; utopianism in revolutionary movements; ideological persuasion versus physical force . . . all are touched upon.

Anti-feminism within revolutionary groups, the belief that women can only be revolutionary when 'romantically' involved with the male of the species, the establishment position that states 'We have not come to such a pass in Russia that we hang women', and the consequent acquittal of women revolutionaries as a way of making them impotent politically, are all ideas worthy of exploration through plays performed by an avowed feminist group such as Monstrous Regiment.

Sadly these latter ideas were only suggested by this play and did not seem to be central or sufficiently explored.

Lindsay Cooper's music was haunting and beautiful but, like the feminist ideas touched upon by her, used only as a background. Indeed this music, so low in volume, was as if in another room, tantalisingly suggested rather than foremost and strong.

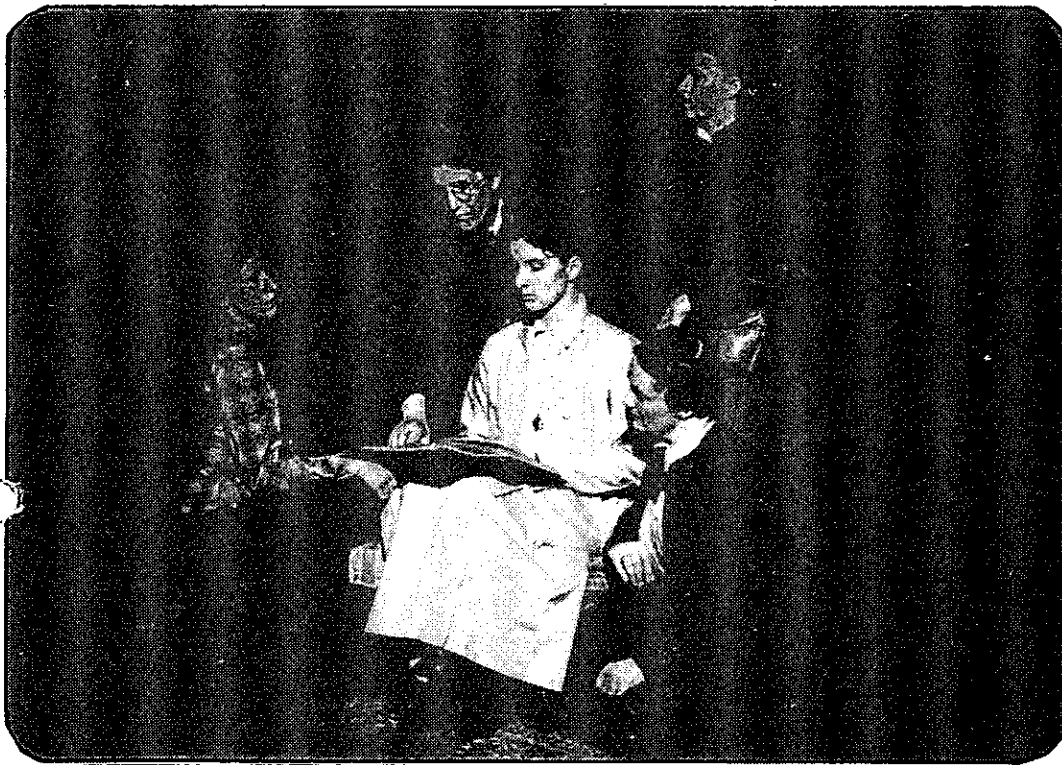
Norma Pitfield

*Monstrous Regiment*  
01-247 2398.

Spare Rib July '82

Spencer Bell June 11 - 24 '82 The Cavalier

# Death of a Tsar



*The Execution*, performed by Monstrous Regiment and written by Mellisa Murray, is showing at The Ralph Thoresby Community Theatre, Leeds June 16-19 and at Battersea Arts Centre, London June 25&26. Carmel Cadden has been to see it.

THE EXECUTION shows how the assassins of Tsar Alexander II, the Holy Father of All Russia, reached their decision that the Tsar's death was essential in bringing about radical change in Russia: the Tsar was a powerful symbol of the old feudal, patriarchal society and revolution was impossible as long as he ruled, in the likeness of God the Father, over all.

When I read the programme notes before the lights went down, I couldn't imagine how this epic portrait of a revolution -- the action spans the seven years preceding the assassination -- could be staged. I envisaged a set of Dr Zhivago type proportions ... and then the play began: on stage, two women, Vera and Amelia, are quietly studying in their apartment in Zurich. They are there because it was impossible in Russia of the early 1870s for women to get a higher education and those who could afford to, and whose families permitted, (Vera's husband approves and supports her medical training) had to go to France or Switzerland to study. Here they had access to the political writings of emigre Russian revolutionaries and when these women returned to Russia, as many did, they were highly-politicised and became actively involved in revolutionary work.

Vera Figner is the main character who starts off as a shy, emotional young woman and develops along with the revolutionary movement, finally crystallizing into a purposeful, courageous and confident person at the point when the decision to kill the Tsar is made. In sharp and often comic contrast, is Goldenburger, a familiar type in most political groups -- he is the

messenger between the groups of subversives, loving and needing the importance that his clandestine work confers upon him. He is vain and self-glorifying but a persuasive speaker. Vera is moved by his story about the repression of liberals in Russia, and leaves her studies and her husband in order to start working for the revolution at home. The lives of the women and men behind the killing of the Tsar are explored at key moments in the movement's growth, so one can see the reasons and motives individuals may have had for being part of what is usually viewed as a distant and impersonal historical event.

The play presents the audience with the questions that these revolutionaries were debating a hundred years ago, drawing many parallels with current political issues. In 1876 the active revolutionaries -- numbering about 200 -- formed themselves into Land and Liberty and propagated socialist thought and popular discontent against the status quo. They organised a massive, peaceful demonstration outside Kazan Cathedral in St Petersburg after which there were many arrests. One of the students arrested, Bogolyubov, was later almost flogged to death by the Governor of St Petersburg, Trepov, for not doffing his cap respectfully -- a minor incident, yet Trepov's brutal over-reaction stimulates the process which leads to the assassination of the Tsar.

One of the women says something like, 'This action of Trepov proves that they count us as nothing -- there were thousands of us at the demonstration, but they ignore us and treat us with scorn because we pose no real threat to their lives or property'. The whole of the second act is based upon this episode and its effects on the revolutionaries. One of them, a young woman, (when I did this bit of history at school I was not told of the part of women had played

with her children, but then discovers that her husband has moved them all to New Zealand without telling her. After this she soon ends up inside after a bout of drinking financed by the petty cash at work.

Debbie, a teenager, tells her parents that she is lesbian after seeing a programme about being gay on TV. Somewhat to her surprise her parents go up the wall at the news and tell her to stop being so stupid. Then after an attempt at suicide she is sent off to mental hospital. When released she goes on the rampage and robs a number of women at knife point in the street in an attempt to break through the complacency of straight society. She is given short shrift by the courts, and even her own lawyers, and sentenced to Borstal.

Cathy, a young respectable middle class woman, finds herself inside after being wrongly convicted of importing drugs.

If you have a chance, go and see Clean Break. Their work is often both moving and funny, and always gripping as much as anything because you know that what you are seeing is based on real experience. Clean Break manage to produce both vivid theatre and say something very relevant about life in prison. And just as importantly they manage to show that people who end up in prison are little different from anyone else, and that it wouldn't take much for society to brand you or me as a criminal and throw us inside prison too.

Danny Golding

QUEEN CHRISTINA by Pam Gems. Tricycle Theatre, until June 19.

PAM BRIGHTON'S production is visually very attractive, simple and uncluttered with lots of cream, white and glass. The costumes come in similar shades with brilliant scarlet for the cardinal for whom Christina develops an unrequited passion.

Christie Cotterill portrays Christina as gauche and clumsy with a blunt, coarse manner of speaking. Christina is attracted to and has affairs with beautiful people of both sexes, whom she feels she must pay.

She condemns the fate which made her Queen of Sweden (Queen elect at 6, crowned at 18). Brought up as a boy to better fit her to be a kingly Queen, she learned to identify with men, her childhood companions. After 10 years as crowned Queen she leaves her country for Italy and Catholicism, abdicating in favour of the cousin she had refused to marry and bear heirs as was expected of her and of her mother before her, a woman who had been the victim of 18 stillbirths. Christina is too strong a woman to really convert and accept woman's subordinate role in catholicism but she is used by the Pope and cardinals in their wars first as a possible Queen of Naples, then of Poland.

Christina rejects the idea of women as breeders for men's use, but later also comes to believe that in not having children it is herself she has denied and is filled with fury and regret at what she has missed.

It is an interesting play, but in continually stressing the overgrown tomboyishness of grown tomboyishness of Christina the character loses all authority. I could never believe she was a Queen who commanded respect and ruled her country, just a misfit I felt sorry for.

Clare Hope

## Television

**IT'S MY PLEASURE: ALAN PRICE** showing Fri 18 June, Playhouse.

IN THE THIRD programme in which well-known personalities examine the work of one of their favourite authors, songwriter Alan Price picks over the writings of George Orwell.

Selections from George Orwell's essays are read by film and theatre director Lindsay Anderson with whom Price collaborated on the films *O Lucky Man* and *Britannia Hospital*.

Extracts from George Orwell's 'Road to Wigan Pier' and diaries kept in the '30s are distributed around a number of Price's songs echoing the mood of Orwell's writing. Inspiration is minimal: extracts are read against a partially-obscured backcloth of contemporary documentary film. The result is what appears to be purely a vehicle for Alan Price's song career, so unless you are a fan of his, you would be better off reading the texts as supplied by George.

Jane Hieatt

## Art

**OUR NEIGHBOURS:** Photographs by Chris Schwarz.

**PAPERWORKS 1970-82** by Joel Fisher. Riverside Studios, Hammersmith, London W6, until June 27.

IF YOU don't know Hammersmith, try doing a brief walk-about before seeing *Our Neighbours*. These photographs by Chris Schwarz of local people and places in the Hammersmith area were all taken last month. Kids, buskers, priests, dentists, Status Quo fans outside the Odeon. I got a great deal of simple-minded pleasure from spotting the guy who made me tea in the Hammersmith Snack Bar.

*Our Neighbours* may well be a neat attempt by the Riverside to locate itself more strongly in its vicinity, but it's also a warm, clear statement that an urban area, however ploughed through by carriageways, can still obstinately retain a community identity.

Its neighbour exhibition in the Studios is Joel Fisher's *Paper Works 1970-82*. This consists mainly of rough-textured, blank squares of paper. But half the viewers there were gazing at three other pieces of paper on the wall — densely-worded, cryptically styled truisms explaining the significance and 'elemental power' of all this blank space. A paradox here? Perhaps it's only me, but these two neighbours are destined for a bust-up.

Peter Spafford

in the Russian Revolution -- I took it for granted all the revolutionaries were men!) attempts to kill Trepov, and is acquitted by the jury after a famous trial which attracted widespread interest from all social circles. Although the revolutionaries rejoice over the acquittal, their joy is short-lived, and the authorities respond by abolishing jury trials — rather as they have done in Northern Ireland. Repressive measures escalate in the government's efforts to contain the growing terrorist activity, and Land and Liberty split over the issue of the Tsar's assassination. Those who are convinced it is the only way to

effect a revolution, form themselves in the People's Will and so the action moves to the climax of the Tsar's death. I was rather taken aback by the extraordinary effect of the puff of smoke and the Tsar popping up like a jack-in-the-box — an odd, comic touch at such a serious moment. This is a demanding play for both performers and audience, requiring close concentration for a good two and a half hours — but I found it well worth the effort, and left the theatre very impressed by the quality of performance and the significance of such a play in these times.

## Art

# Lost and found

Sylvia Pankhurst gave up life as an artist in favour of political activity. *Caroline Waller* has been to see a rare show of her paintings and drawings on show as part of *Women Live!*

DO YOU love museums? When young, I loved the Victoria and Albert Museum in South Kensington, London. I loved the elaborate, ornate dresses that smelt of past grandeur; banquets and balls for hundreds of people. Nowadays I look at them and experience unreality. Museums contain the history of the privileged, of battles fought for senseless reasons, killing hundreds who would not benefit from the victories.

Does this strike a chord? If so, I would recommend to you the National Museum of Labour history in East London. It is an *alive*, positive history of real people, real events and real struggles.

The museum is situated in the heart of what is, or used to be, working-class London. Having rung the doorbell to get in, you step into a hallway lined with posters and paintings. *Labour leads the way* captions a poster of workers breaking down the door of the House of Lords (1906). Rooms are filled with exhibits of the labour movement's history. From Keir Hardie mugs, an ASLEF table (upon which the 8-hour-day was agreed between ASLEF and the railway employers in 1919), to Harold Wilson's pipe! Upstairs, past *Food for Spain* posters, is a large hall full of old trade union banners: *Workers of the world unite; you have nothing to lose but your chains, and the world to win!*

In a little side room is a small exhibition of watercolours and chalk or charcoal pictures — about 40 in all. This is the centenary exhibition of the work of Sylvia Pankhurst. After the spectacle of 10ft-high banners in reds and golds, these small, apparently drab pictures were not eye-catching.

On closer examination, however, these proved to be exciting and moving. The pictures are grouped under six headings — Venice, The Potteries, Fisher Women, Manufacture, Agriculture, and Studies from Life. The earlier Venetian paintings are more colourful, but tended to be of scenes and places, rather than people. But *A small boy in an Italian street* contained a hint of what was to come.

The later work mainly portrays women at work; packing herrings, shoemaking, cotton-spinning, etc. The pictures are beautiful, conveying the sense of what these various trades



were like. When you remember she was painting against a background of intense political activity, and subsisting at times on bread and water in order to paint (*The Suffragette Movement* — Sylvia Pankhurst's autobiography, *Virago*), the pictures are even more amazing. The exhibition contains only a small selection of Sylvia's work — she drew many sketches when in prison for campaigning for the vote, and designed many Women's Social and Political Union posters.

However, the political agitator and organiser, as most of us know Sylvia Pankhurst, took over. Eventually she abandoned the vocation she had always dreamed of — art. She continued campaigning for the vote, and for social reform generally, throughout the First World War, forming her own East London Federation of Suffragettes. When the vote was achieved (which in the end was largely her doing, and her doing alone) she turned to other causes, but never returned to art. Looking at the exhibition, this seems a sad loss indeed. Sylvia Pankhurst achieved an awful lot in her lifetime, but at a great loss to the art world, and, probably, to herself.

The exhibition continues at the National Museum of Labour History, Limehouse Town Hall, Commercial Road, London E14, until July 5. Tel: 01-515 3229. Open Tue-Sat.

CITY LIMITS MAY 28-JUNE 3, 1982

♀ 'The Execution' by Melissa Murray, presented by Monstrous Regiment (ICA) Monstrous Regiment's latest project is a frustratingly flawed piece of epic theatre. As an act of love and faith, Melissa Murray's rehabilitation of the hitherto 'hidden' roles taken by women in the assassination of Tsar Alexander (father to Nicholas swept away by the Bolsheviks) shows us the familiar strengths of women, their capacity for sacrifice, the power to withstand great physical and emotional suffering and, more surprisingly, these middle-class intellectuals' unflinching political commitment even when it necessitates terrorism. Absorbing as historical research, it yet remains dramatically inert—a case of the eyes too big for the stomach. At a lengthy 3 hours-plus, and with a cast of 8 who must assume the mantle of 35, the acting skills, it has to be said, are overstretched. In general, the women come off best with Gillian Hanna's Vera Figner—moving from terrified uncertainty to grim determination—outstanding. And Richard Albrecht, with a subtly ironic sense of timing, manages to make both roles of a zealous revolutionary and a cynical Minister of the Interior entirely credible; his love scene (as Andrei the revolutionary) with Mary McCusker's rigidly disciplined Sofya also turns out to be one of the touching scenes. A difficult evening, although director Sue Dunderdale (with designer Gemma Jackson and composer Lindsay Cooper) orchestrates the limited resources to often great visual and atmospheric effect. (Carole Woddis)