

CARYL CHURCHILL'S Vinegar Tom

Tom (Monstrous Regiment, at the ICA and on tour) may be set in the world of seventeenth-century rural witchcraft, but it speaks through its striking images and its plethora of ironic contradictions...

It is a play about sexual politics. Churchill's witches are shown to have been the scapegoats of poverty and pseudo-religious persecution...

Take the case of Alice Noakes and her mother - poor enough to starve, not quite poor enough to be stigmatised by being on the parish's social security.

They squat in a hovel and beg, borrow and steal to survive. Alice steals a night of "love" in a damp ditch with a dark stranger who teases her he is the devil.

In today's welfare jargon she'd be on the files as an unmarried mother or a single-parent family...

Mother Noakes tries to borrow a bit of yeast from her ladder-climbing neighbour, Margery, a woman so sexually frigid and self-righteous that she batter she charms and which won't "come"...

Take the case of Susan - young, married, with one toddler, one child on the breast and another on the way...

Take the case of Miss Betty, daughter of the manor, about to be married off to a man of her father's choosing...

Take the case of Jack, Margery's husband, besotted with an unrequited passion for Alice...

Take the case of the "cunning woman" whose herbal home pharmacy is as busy as a GP's surgery...

Take the case of Mr. Packer - witch-hunter extraordinary, who in the name of God prods women's private parts with sharp metal...

At one point the cunning woman explains the art of sinking without drowning (yet another irony, of course)...

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CATHERINE ITZIN TRIBUNE DEC

Witchcraft under the spotlight in 'Vinegar Tom'



OCCASIONALLY, the more lurid of our Sunday newspapers will unearth a coven of witches.

There will be a titillatingly blurred picture of several naked forms and a suggestive account of what generally happens at such gatherings.

Very few men were singled out as servants of the Devil: the role was most often cast upon women. Why was that?

Those days there were no scientific explanations why milk failed to churn into butter, why cows died and why people were suddenly attacked by strange pains.

as the root of their trouble. Interspersed by arresting contemporary songs, a series of short scenes move from the old widow's hovel to the dairy of a neighbouring farmhouse...

It is when the action shifts to the room of the trial, where the witch-hunter carries out his inhumane practices with a needle and into the prison, that the play moves one to compassion and anger on behalf of these victims who just happened to be old, lonely or ignorant women.

There were excellent characterisations by the cast (unidentified by part in the programme), while costumes and lighting gave the effect of a brown, rustic hue over most of the activities, except at the trial which was harshly lit.

A powerful production. FRU CLARK

HULL DAILY MAIL

Humberdale Theatre, Monstrous Regiment in 'Vinegar Tom' (Caryl Churchill)

'VINEGAR TOM' is about witches. But its thesis is more general, and Caryl Churchill, who is one of Britain's most promising young playwrights, is looking at witch-hunting as a symbol of Fascist intolerance everywhere and in every age.

Shades of Arthur Miller's 'The Crucible', perhaps. Except that Miss Churchill is not talking about a specific era, as Miller did about McCarthyism in post-war America.

She sees in the burning of witches the same social phenomenon that reared its ugly head in the persecution and exploitation of Jews, blacks, and she extrapolates, women. Set in 17th-century England, the play examines a group of women dealing with the problems which beset their sex in all ages: the problems of widowhood, the unwanted child, the claustrophobia of marriage, the unmarried mother, and spinsterhood.

Witches were, apparently, mainly single young women or menopausal old widows - labelling them witches was the 17th-century's way of dealing with social problems and eccentrics.

Thematically, this is a bit chaotic, but Miss Churchill gives it dramatic coherence by shaping the various episodes so that they lead up to the drama of a witch-finder's court.

She comments upon the action by setting at the side songs which, though they occasionally have the naivety and smugness of hindsight, point up the contemporary relevance of the event.

Monstrous Regiment is a new group of considerable ability dedicated to producing women's theatre. But although the purpose of the play and of the company is didactic, the quality of Miss Churchill's writing and the remarkable versatility of a set of very good actors and musicians ensure that the total effect is both moving and thought-provoking rather than hectoring.

The songs are memorable, and much more disciplined than those in their last production 'Scum' which was seen in Sheffield some months ago. And director Pam Brighton has ensured that they do not upset the pace or rhythm of the play which she handles with sensitivity.

The show is to tour and will be seen in Goolle and York.

YORKSHIRE POST

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Vinegar Tom ICA

Ned Chaillet

Even in horror films witch-hunts usually have, ambiguously or blatantly, a sexual element. Caryl Churchill is generous in her feminist play about witches...

From the casual copulation of a country girl in a ditch with a passing man who claims to be the devil, Miss Churchill builds up a panorama of English life during the great witch-hunts.

Many of her women live in a society separate from men, basically powerless but perhaps threatening: a widow scraping by in a collapsing cottage, her

daughter unmarriedable with an illegitimate son; an old woman herbalist who poisons for love, sleep, pregnancy or abortion. But the women who men are not better off, bear children, beyond endurance living unloved with a husband or being married off to a man they abhor.

Miss Churchill paints a picture, relieved infrequently by humour, directed with precision by Pam Brighton as played with an element of grandeur by the new theatre company Monstrous Regiment.

The women and men of the company, whether enacting historically based events which lead to occasions of witchcraft, to torture and hanging, singing the pointed, militant feminist songs which tie the action to the present, have found a style which demands serious attention.

Their final song, 'We Are the Witches Now', does not speak confidently of the present, but when the bright light comes up at long last, and the company comes together in a powerful chorus, everything that has gone before sounds like a manifesto.

THEATRE

Vinegar Tom (Humberdale Theatre, Hull) THE Monstrous Regiment are a new theatre company made up of actors, musicians, writers and directors, and their principal reason for coming together is a dissatisfaction with the opportunities offered women working in the theatre.

Last week the company were performing 'Vinegar Tom,' by Caryl Churchill, at Hull, and the audience reaction on the opening night was a complete

MORNING STAR

