

MONSTROUS REGIMENT

ALDERSHOT WEEKEND NEWS
 Aldershot,
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From witches to repression

WITCH persecution in a superstition-riddled world is the theme of Monday night's production of "Vinegar Tom" at the West End Centre, Aldershot.

Written by Caryl Churchill, the play investigates connections between witch mania, wife battering, sexual repression and state control.

It is performed by the Monstrous Regiment Theatre Company, set up in 1975 by professional women theatre workers whose productions deal with themes throwing light on the position of women in society. Bookings have opened for the performance, which begins at 7.30 p.m.

THE MID-SUSSEX TIMES
 HAYWARDS HEATH,
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Gardner Centre
 Sussex University

The Monstrous Regiment, a new company set up in 1975 by a group of actresses who were dissatisfied with the opportunities for women in the more traditional theatres, are at the Gardner Centre this week. Today, Thursday and Friday, they are presenting "Vinegar Tom" which the company commissioned from Caryl Churchill and is about witch persecution in the 17th century set against the background of the aspirations of ignorant people.

Seam—Death, Destruction and Dirty Washing," which will be given on Saturday night, centres on a group of laundry workers in the Paris Commune in 1871. It has music and is billed as being funny and conscientiously researched.

On February 14 the Oxford Playhouse Company open for a week with Alan Ayckbourn's trilogy "The Norman Conquests." The production continues until February 26 with the three plays which are complete in themselves, being presented at different performances. In the gallery until February 26 Dick Whall's "The Education Machine and its Appendages" can be seen, also an artist's view of educational processes.

BURTON DAILY MAIL

BURTON-ON-TRENT,
 STAFFORDSHIRE

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MONSTROUS REGIMENT IN BURTON

Monstrous Regiment is the second theatre company to tour the West Midlands in this first season of new drama touring, promoted jointly by West Midlands Arts and a number of venues in the region.

The Monstrous Regiment Theatre Company was set up in 1975 by professional women theatre workers, dissatisfied with the meagre opportunities for women in the traditional theatre.

The company, therefore, ensure that women form the majority and take on decisive roles and also commission work by women writers dealing with themes throwing light on the position of women in society.

The company's latest production — *Vinegar Tom* — is being presented at Burton Technical College at 8.0 p.m. on November 4th. It is described as a "witch-hunt" with music, for the oppressed and possessed. Here we see a class divided, not united. Witch persecution is seen against a background of the aspirations of ignorant people, who fail to understand and thereby control their lives, and seek scapegoats to explain it. We learn how fanatics could control people, not by guns, but through superstition.

With music, humour and humanity, the play poses questions about today. Are our psychiatrists just modern witch-finders? Are today's wife-beaters inheritors of that same hatred of female sexuality and female power? Can we say that the world we inhabit is any more humane or rational than that of the 17th century?

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MONSTROUS REGIMENT

Witchfinding

Michéle Victor previews an impressive new work of feminist theatre.

Monstrous Regiment's second play opens in London this week after a two-month tour. Like their first production 'Scum', it takes a women's-eye look at history, in this case witchcraft in the seventeenth century. It will also be the second play by Caryl Churchill to be seen in London recently—the other, 'Light Shining in Buckinghamshire', which deals with the Levellers and Ranters, was also set in the same period.

'Vinegar Tom' is a pithy 90 minutes. Set on an estate in the rural north of England, it unfolds the complex and subtle mixture of fear, faith, ignorance and superstition which was such a breeding ground for witch-hunting. Vinegar Tom is the cat who belongs to Alice and her mother Joan—land and man-less outcasts in their community. To add insult to social injury, Alice enjoys sex and a reputation as a whore, and the two women slot easily into the role of scapegoats when Jack and Marjory (local small farmer and wife) find their animals plagued by some unknown disease.



Landless, man-less, scapegoats.

When the witchfinder visits the village, the small-scale sniping finds a larger framework; the purging of witches is seen as a service to God and country, and other women are sucked in as victims—the cunning herbalist, the naive young mother who aborted her unwanted baby. Set against the brutality meted out to these socially dispensable women are the constraints placed on the squire's daughter Betty, who is locked up and treated as 'ill' for refusing to marry the man of her parents' choice. She is spared hanging as a witch because she has the protection of a male doctor, whose primitive methods of healing are sanctified because he is a member of a respectable male-dominated medical profession.

The unfolding process is subtly written and played; a passing 'devil take you' by an angry Joan becomes a witch's curse; a mangy cat becomes a witch's familiar. All the women victims try in some way to control parts of their lives, and it is clear that their own consciousness limits them as much as the machinery brought against them. The women are not simply helpless victims,



Trial by torture.

nor are the men simply manipulators. A painfully funny scene finds Jack asking the cunning woman how to get his you-knowwhat back—he is convinced the witch has pinched it; sexuality is fraught with fear and ignorance for everyone, even though women become repositories for blame.

The company have self-consciously tried to avoid using music as a simple appendage, with musicians sitting at the side of the stage, punctuating the action with pleasant variety. Members of the cast emerge to sing in modern dress, in parallel to the action. The relationship between music/theatre is still a very under-analysed aspect of modern theatre, and Monstrous Regiment, despite the care they have taken, falter here.

Where many groups use music to give the musicians a chance to show off their paces or to paper over cracks in the text, 'Vinegar Tom' uses songs as an active force in the play, challenging the audience to think across the gap between the historical representation and the position of women today. This is done by putting the music into a contemporary mode—dress, melodic line, language.

The difficulty is that within the songs the modernisms sometimes go too far, presenting an analysis undermining the complexity of the text. One song says 'The country's what it is/because the family's what it is.../because a wife is what she is to her man', when we have seen that it is also a question of power based on land ownership, of the relationship between science and superstition.

The music works best when it is used relatively conventionally—heightening elements in a scene—parts of a song on ducking, for example. But Monstrous Regiment are at least taking theatrical risks in this area, and with such a strong play the risks are carried through. The company, which aims never to have more men than women in it, has produced a piece of work which is as impressive for its breadth as for its feminist commitment.

'Vinegar Tom', music by Helen Glavin, directed by Pam Brighton, December 7-18, at the ICA. See Fringe listings for details.

TIME OUT

Historical illustration to women's subjection

MONSTROUS Regiment, one of the more interesting touring theatre groups to emerge in recent years, begin a one-week tour of North Staffordshire and South Cheshire on Monday.

The company differ from other itinerant drama outfits in that their work is almost entirely devoted to issues concerning women and women's rights.

In both "Vinegar Tom" and "Scum," which form their repertoire for next week's tour, Monstrous Regiment use historical events to draw parallels with the problems facing women today, writes Alan Cookman.

"Vinegar Tom" is described as "a witch hunt with music for the oppressed and the possessed." It raises

questions about the witch hunts of the 17th century and links them to the situation of women today.

"Did they kill and corrupt or were they the victims — scapegoats of Church and State in unsettled times when people needed diverting from the real source of their misfortunes?" is the question posed by the play's author, Caryl Churchill.

In "Scum" — sub-titled "Death, Destruction and Dirty Washing" — the company present a musical celebration of the women of the Paris Commune.

Beautifully constructed, the play traces the political and emotional development of women laundry workers and two young men of the People's Militia through the struggles of the Commune. Its co-author is C. G. Bond, the former resident dramatist at the Victoria Theatre.

Area Arts Officer Mr.

Frank Challenger, who has arranged the tour, hopes the choice of venues (see below) will introduce a wider audience to the work of this much-acclaimed group.

Issues

"They have already performed at Alsager and Madeley but I am convinced they can appeal to a wider public than campus audiences. Their music is superb, and subjects of their work are linked to straightforward issues which ordinary people come across all the time."

Monstrous Regiment can be seen at Alsager College on Monday ("Vinegar Tom"; 8.0); Burslem Leisure Centre on Tuesday ("Scum"; 2.0); Newcastle College of Further Education on Wednesday ("Scum"; 2.0); Guildhall, Newcastle on Thursday ("Scum"; 8.0); Madeley College on Friday ("Scum"; 7.30).

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