

## Janelle Reinelt on *Origin of the Species*

Extract (pp 172-174) from 'Resisting Thatcherism: The Monstrous Regiment and the School of Hard Knox', by Janelle Reinelt, in Lynda Hart and Peggy Phelan eds, *Acting Out: Feminist Performances*, Michigan University Press 1993 pp 161-180. The full paper can be read in the Commentaries section of this website's ARCHIVE pages.

One of the most successful productions of Monstrous Regiment during the 1980s was *Origin of the Species* (1984), written by Bryony Lavery for Hanna and McCusker. Its "origins" began in a three-week workshop with the two actresses, Lavery, and director Nona Sheppard, a typical beginning for Regiment productions. It was, Hanna quips, "intended to be a history of the world for two characters."<sup>19</sup> For source material they read widely, ranging from Capra's *The Turning Point* to various classical accounts of evolution to Susan Griffin's *Woman and Nature* to the work of Jane Goodall. Their workshop strategies included mask work and improvisations, wide ranging and without preliminary assumptions about character, plot, or setting. After the workshop Lavery went away and sketched in the script; three more weeks of rehearsals consolidated the project.

In its final form *Origin of the Species* represents the encounter between Molly, a Yorkshire archaeologist, and her four-million-year-old ancestor, whom she uncovers while on a dig with Louis and Mary Leakey at Olduvai Gorge. Molly smuggles her "baby" home and "raises" her, learning in exchange a great deal about human development as Victoria comes into her own. On New Year's Eve, 1984, the present time of the play, Molly sends Victoria out in the world, aware that she cannot keep her at home anymore.

The play works to both insinuate women into natural history and to critique patriarchal history. Digging up the ancient skeleton of originary "man," Molly gets "the shock of her life when this creature, whom she expects to be a man, is in fact a woman."<sup>20</sup> What if historical narrative were told with a woman as the first protagonist instead of a man? As for received stories, gender critique formulates them in a different light: at one point Molly tells Victoria "the clock story," which is an account of scientific investigation and appropriation of the earth by men who treat it as a clock (with suitable resonances to Enlightenment Deism). A curious boy, called variously "Plato Aristotle Copernicus Galileo Bacon Descartes Newton," took the clocks apart and assembled new clocks until

finally he made a clock which could  
make  
everything vanish  
this is my best clock he said  
my vanishing clock  
I must take this and show it to my mother  
and he ran with his vanishing clock  
hither and thither  
but his mother had vanished

and he looked at his exploding clock  
and saw that he had very little time  
left<sup>21</sup>

To "discover" Victoria is thus to embark on an exploration of seeing the world and our accounts of it from the perspective of the female gaze. This is the working premise of the play.

McCusker, whose early training included three years at the Glasgow Academy of Speech and Drama, had a special acting challenge in creating a representation of the creature Victoria. "I had to try for a character who was child-like but not childish, who had an innocence because she didn't know or understand this world she'd been projected into, and who gradually through friendship leapfrogs into the 20th century."<sup>22</sup> McCusker did research on the physical development of her creature, especially on gorillas and on the native languages of the Olduvai Gorge, in order to help find physical attributes of movement and speech for Victoria. Her physical movement, created with the help of director Sheppard, featured bent legs but a straight back—"rather like a ballet dancer doing a plié"—which enabled her to move at high speed. She wore a hairy body suit for the part, from which some of the hair could be removed for the second act, as Victoria assimilates to modern life. Her vocal work started with basic words, which approximated the words of people from the regions where Victoria originated, and McCusker altered her sound production to create a new voice: "I couldn't alter my own physical being, but I could try to alter the physical energy in the mouth for making sentences out of sounds." Reasoning that people who live in the open air must communicate across large distances, McCusker used her diaphragm, creating a "voice for fear which was earsplitting in the auditorium, giving some people quite a fright."<sup>23</sup>

This production is representative of the imagination and collaboration of the Monstrous Regiment at its best. For Hanna and McCusker the opportunity to work together is always a great satisfaction. Gillian Hanna on McCusker: "I think Mary's a terrific actor and it's lovely to be on stage with an actor that you know terribly well, have worked with a lot, and really trust."<sup>24</sup> The production was generally well received on tour and in London at the Drill Hall. Ros Asquith wrote of it: "it has much of the fascination of good science fiction, the moral resonance of a parable, a beautiful set that combines domestic bliss with the call of the wild and confirms Jenny Carey as one of the most innovative designers around, and marvelously funny performances from Gillian Hanna (Molly) and Mary McCusker (Victoria)."<sup>25</sup>

## NOTES

21. Bryony Lavery, "Origin of the Species", *Plays by Women*, ed. Mary Remant (London: Methuen 1987), 6: 81.

22. Interview with Mary McCusker, 13 July 1989.

23. Ibid.

24. Interview with Gillian Hanna, 22 June 1989.

25. *Observer*, 31 March 1985.