

Daily News, Friday, December 7, 1984



Roles of women

aping around in front of a big audience may not be everyone's cup of tea, but if it means a decent part it suits the pair pictured.

Mary McCusker, in the specially tailored prehistoric fur outfit, and Gillian Hanna star in a two-person play at Birmingham Rep.

They belong to the feminist touring company Monstrous Regiments, which has a reputation for tackling gritty issues with daring originality.

The all-woman group has broken new ground by linking up with the theatre for a co-produc-

tion. The play *Origin of The Species — A Love Story* runs in the Studio until December 22.

The group was founded nine years ago to give women more and better stage roles.

"I'd always loved strong roles like Hamlet but all the good parts seemed to be written for men. There was hardly anything for older women," Mary said.

Gillian said the unfair ratios of men to women made her angry and didn't reflect reality.

Though they have created superb openings for budding actresses, they have arguably opened themselves up to the same criticism.

"We didn't consciously remove the men. But once they'd moved on I found it was much easier without them," Gillian said.

The philosophy of the seven-strong company is

to try and fuse their private lives and their work. Without being didactic they hope to leave their audiences with plenty to think about.

"Because our lives infiltrate through our work it can feel like a personal attack if the critics are harsh," Mary said.

"Some people find us threatening if we push fear buttons like unemployment which worry people. They don't want people running around the perimeter calling for change.

"Others consider us to be po-faced and say they would rather have a lighthearted evening out."

The group has plays specially written and has attracted a loyal following since their first highly successful play, *Scum*.

WALSALL OBSERVER, FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 23, 1984

Theatre

Seasonal stories of love and laughs

Settle back in the Birmingham Rep Studio Theatre and listen to a New Year's Eve tale about the "Origin of the Species"... it may just be true.

The premier production of Bryony Lavery's version of the Charles Darwin best-seller started in the Studio last night — a co-production with leading feminist touring company Monstrous Regiments.

Darwin's story about how we began was an overnight success back in 1859; Lavery's two-person version takes us forward to New Year's Eve 1984.

Archaeologist Molly Starkey is telling her lifelong friend Victoria a love story: historical romance set in Africa and Yorkshire, strange and adventurous and spanning the dawn of time until now.

Comedy

Gillian Hanna and Mary McCusker star in "The Origin of the Species — A Love Story", directed by Nona Shepphard. It runs in the Studio Theatre until December 22.

In the main theatre there are some pre-Christmas situations being worked out in true chaotic fashion in Alan Ayckbourn's "Season's Greetings," which runs until December 15.

Neville and Belinda have invited a dozen friends over to celebrate Christmas...but the squabbles soon start after an incompetent puppet show, a midnight love scene and a trigger-happy looter.

Performances start at 7.30 p.m., Mondays to

Fridays and 8 p.m. on Saturdays. There are also matinee performances on Thursdays at 2.30 p.m. and Saturdays at 4 p.m.

Darwin comes to the stage!

ON a fresh autumn morning in 1859 Charles Darwin published his "Origin of Species." By nightfall, the first edition was completely sold out.

125 years later, Monstrous Regiment, a leading feminist touring company, in association with Birmingham Rep, bring to the stage the two person version of this popular best-seller.

It is late; a dark clear night: it is the last night of the year, and the first quarter of the New Moon. Molly Starkey, famous archeologist and raconteur is awaiting the passing of 1984 with mixture of excitement and dread.

As the clock ticks on towards midnight, she tells us a story. It is a love story, a historical romance, set in Africa and Yorkshire.

It is an epic tale filled with excitement and adventure, explosions and upheaval which spans those heady years from The Dawn of Time until Now.

It is a story so very strange that even Molly's lifelong friend Victoria finds it difficult to believe it could possibly have happened.

But it is true...will you believe it?

"Origin of the Species — A Love Story" is Monstrous Regiment's 16th production and its first co-production with Birmingham Rep.

Its run in the Birmingham Rep Studio theatre is from November 22 to December 22. Bryony Avery, among foremost feminist writers in the UK, has written four previous plays for Monstrous Regiment, including their highly successful "Calamity."

"Bryony Lavery has an excellent ear for one-liners, pastiche and bizarre detail".

Gillian Hanna and Mary McCusker, both founder members of Monstrous Regiment (last seen together in "Calamity"), are directed by Nona Shepphard. Jenny Carey is the designer.

Monsters

This week Monstrous Regiment go in search of our foremothers—and a good night out! BARNEY BARDSLEY meets them.

Monstrous Regiment are celebrating. In 1975 they first got together as women performers so they are marking the decade with a September extravaganza. But it was actually 1976 when their first performance, 'Scum' (by Claire Luckhan and Chris Bond), was staged. So next year will also be marked—with an anniversary production.

And no bad thing either. Monstrous Regiment, or 'the monsters', as they wryly refer to themselves, have consistently produced plays which tackle the complexities of being female in a lively and often controversial way. They are a vital part of the women's movement. And in an era when mealy-mouthed liberalism is the refuge of many erstwhile revolutionaries, they are, as founder member Gillian Hanna told me, 'unrepentant feminists'.

Their work is a continual 'attempt to achieve a balance between artistic needs as performers, and our needs in terms of politics.'

That the company was, until recently, a mixture of men and women, was a focus for criticism amongst more hardline activists. An article in *Feminist Review* once accused them of 'bourgeois idealism' for including men. Gillian thinks it was just the opposite: a need to bring the terrible conflicts between men and women out into the open.

Critics may have noted that the remaining two men in the company have now departed, so recent shows like 'Calamity', about wild west Jane, have been all-women productions. 'Funny how you don't miss them,' muses Gillian.

The company have had a chequered history. Some shows have captured the public and critical imagination: 'Vinegar Tom' by Caryl Churchill (1976) set this prominent playwright firmly on the

feminist map; 'Mourning Pictures' by Honor Moore (1981) was a much-praised exploration of a mother's death, and 'The Fourth Wall' by Franca Rame and Dario Fo (1983) was a spellbinding evocation of Ulrike Meinhof's political philosophy and personal anguish, performed by Paola Dionisotti.

Some productions have flopped. 'The Execution' was an overlong and turgid look at revolutionaries in 19th century Russia, and 'Calamity' was a jolly, but not very vibrant, romp which failed to impress the critics.

Failure, of course, is a part of the theatrical process; just as much as the triumphs: Gillian acknowledges this in her gloomy appraisal of modern theatre. Her own training started at the Liverpool and Everyman theatres, where a new show went up every three weeks and where there was a constant change of roles, keeping the actor on her toes. These days there's far less opportunity to learn the ropes so thoroughly. Young actors have meagre facilities for performing, and so theatre is being starved of future genius.

Nor do the powers-that-be realise, says Gillian, that all those big names now fêted by the media—David Edgar, Howard Brenton, Caryl Churchill et al—started their careers in that hotbed of talent so casually dismissed as the 'fringe', and so arrogantly belittled as 'less professional' and less fund-worthy, than 'centres of excellence'—the RSC and the National Theatre.

With Bryony Lavery's 'Origin of the Species', which goes in quest of our ancestral foremothers, opening at the Drill Hall this week; a project with the Cockpit Youth Theatre about women warriors starting in the summer; a play about Cassandra in the pipeline for the autumn, Monstrous Regiment are certainly not bowing to increased financial pressure ten years on, in their continuing quest for—'a good night out'. ●

'Origin of the Species' is at the Drill Hall. See Theatre: Fringe for details.



MARY TISSERAND