

Monstrous Regiment celebrates 15 years of putting women's issues on stage this year. IRENE TIMS reports.

The fruit of frustration

In 1975 five women, frustrated with the limited opportunities offered them in all areas of the theatre, formed a theatre group.

Its aim was to place women's experiences to the forefront of the theatrical stage while, at the same time, presenting challenging entertainment.

They called themselves Monstrous Regiment, a name derived from the pamphlet issued by the 16th century preacher John Knox, *The first blast of the trumpet against the Monstrous Regiment of Women*, which was a protest that the rule of women was against God's law.

Their policy is also to perform plays with predominantly female casts and to deal with issues of concern to those seeking a feminist interpretation.

Witchcraft

"In 1979 we introduced a series of mini-plays from France, Italy and America, but the main emphasis lies in specially commissioned plays and those mainly by women," Gillian Hanna, one of the co-founders, explained.

Vinegar Tom by Caryl Churchill was one of their first productions.

It explored witchcraft in the 17th century and the economic pressures and role of women in that society.

To give prominence to the present issues within the 17th century experience, contemporary music and song were introduced.

Music has played a key role in most of Monstrous Regiment's productions since inception but Ms Hanna expressed regret that



Mary McCusker and Gillian Hanna in *Love Story of the Century* by Marta Tikkanen.

this had tended to diminish over the years because of economic pressure on the group's activities.

"We were very conscious of style at the beginning and music adds a whole layer of meaning and understanding to a play.

There were both musicians and actors on the payroll originally but with arts subsidy reductions in real terms, we are down to

only one paid administrator."

Within the rich tapestry of their past musical repertoire was *Floorshow*, written again by Caryl Churchill in collaboration with Michele Wandor which presented "cock-pecked wives" and "househusbands" in a working class formula to turn sexist stereotypes inside out.

To celebrate the company's 15th anniversary, three produc-

tions are planned, each one applauding the diversity of women's lives which Gillian Hanna expresses as "broken-backed by marriage, children and other divergences unlike the straight linear attack of the male".

The first, *Love Story of the Century*, is about a disintegrating marriage.

It was written in 1978 and spe-

cially adapted for Monstrous Regiment by Claire Venables from an autobiographical poem by Marta Tikkanen.

"When the couple met, she said it was like a forest fire," explained Ms Hanna. "They saw each other and that was it: they knew there was nobody else.

"They saw themselves as the love story of the century."

But the marriage disintegrates and the main character, who remains unnamed, is torn between her desire to leave and her continuing love for her husband.

"If she hadn't loved him so immensely she would have been able to simply pack her bags and go," said Ms Hanna.

"But she's very clear too about her own failings, how she colluded, and that's one reason why it's a really wonderful piece.

Resolution

"I think it's very helpful and hopeful that she was able to take her behaviour and analyse it like that.

"I think that's helpful to other women in the same situation and gives the play a hopeful resolution."

Reviews have labelled it a play about alcoholism but this is hotly refuted by Ms Hanna, who shares the leading roles with co-founder

"It's a painful yet honest, clear-sighted and loving examination of a marriage in which alcoholism was only one of the difficult factors contributing to the tragedy," she said.

□ *The Love Story of the Century* is at Premier tour at The Arts Centre, University of Warwick from March 5-7.

PRESS CUTTINGS

TAYLORS

MARTA TIKKANEN was a middle-class wife, mother and novelist married to a well-known Finnish celebrity — the illustrator and travel writer George Tikkanen. The story of their stormy marriage, almost wrecked by his alcoholism, is told by pioneering women's theatre company Monstrous Regiment in their latest production, *Love Story of the Century*, which opens at the Traverse, Edinburgh, tonight.

In their fifteenth year, Monstrous Regiment are enjoying a new lease of life. Having in the past few years concentrated on the American hinterland for suitable material — their preference has always been for new work — they have now turned their attention back to Europe.

Last year Mary McCusker, a founder member of the company who originally hailed from Glasgow, brought her one-woman show, *Beatrice*, based on the fourteenth-century Montaiolou diaries, to the Traverse. Esoteric-sounding maybe, but as usual with *Monsters*, as the company have affectionately come to be known, the reality turned out to be a good deal racter.

First published in verse form in 1976, *Love Story of the Century* brought Tikkanen immediate success, winning the Nordic women's prize for literature. She had already made something of a name for herself with her first novel and subsequently came to be better known here with *Manrape*, a discussion of rape from a woman's point of view, published by Virago in 1977.

Love Story, equally takes the woman's part and is a grim, piercingly honest account of the anger and self-critical torments eddying around husband George's dipsomania.

It is not enough, as McCusker points out, just about alcoholism. "It is about that, but it isn't just about that. The fact he's an alcoholic may be the core of it but wrapped around it is this great love affair.

"The piece affirms their love and passion. George was obviously a very gifted, humorous, charismatic sort of man whom it must have been smashing to fall in love with. As Marta says: 'We couldn't help it.'"

But things changed, and *Love Story* describes in graphic detail a family life torn about by alcoholism — the clearing-up after his regular drinking spells, coping with the recurring cycles of violence, the effect on the children, and inevitably the disintegration itself of the relationship between Marta and George.

"Marta wrote it because she wanted the relationship to go somewhere," says McCusker. "She is saying 'look, this is what has happened, this is what it has been like. We're not going to survive if we don't look at this.' But you also feel the relationship would have run into trouble even if there hadn't been the alcohol problem."

The relationship did survive and George continued to refer to Marta as his "beloved wife." It says much for both of them, believes McCusker, that this was so. George eventually died in 1984 from cancer.

For McCusker, *Love Story* is very much a piece of its time — the seventies — in its description of a woman finding her own sense of reality through the women's movement.

For the play's director, Debbie Shewell, a generation younger than McCusker, *Love Story* triggers a whole load of recognitions about destructive patterns of behaviour in loving relationships. "You look at it and go 'yes, I've done that.' But there is addiction on both sides, in the way she loves as well as the way he drinks."

"We tried very hard not to turn her into St Marta," says McCusker. Instead, *Monsters* hope we will take the emotional journey with her and see a woman beginning to observe herself and her own collusion in the *Love Story of the Century*.

Carole Woddis

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*Love as a
mainly
angered
thing*

GLASGOW

HERALD

CHRIS TAYLOR

3rd Floor, 1/2 Alfred Place,
London WC1E 7EB

Tel: 01-580 0442
Fax: 01-436 1489