



## 1978-1980 A Challenging Time

This file contains an extract from Gillian Hanna's Introduction to *Monstrous Regiment: A Collective Celebration* (Nick Hern Books 1991).

The period covered by this extract, and its title, have a corresponding period and title in the website's History pages.

The Introduction provides an extensive historical account of the company. It also includes extracts from the recollections of people who had worked with Monstrous Regiment, and had been asked to contribute these for the book.

Apart from minor corrections to dates, and the addition of Arabic numerals to the pagination, the original text has been left unchanged. This includes the periodisation and headings used in the book, which differ from those in the website's History pages.

There is a separate Archive file that contains the complete Introduction and other editorial material.

We are very grateful to Nick Hern Books for their permission to reproduce this material.

Introduction © Gillian Hanna 1991.

.....

After the success of *Floorshow* we thought that the cabaret form was worth exploring still further, raising as it did questions about the female performer and her relationship to the audience. It seemed to us that no matter how skilled the performer was, or how strong the material, there was often an almost tangible sense of unease in the audience when the women performed; that when Roger or Clive Russell appeared on their own as opposed to one of the women, we thought we could often feel the audience relaxing. Was that a communal, unspoken, unconscious conviction that they felt safer when the men were centre-stage? Or were we somehow communicating our own fears that it still might not be legitimate for women to be confronting the audience in this direct way?

*Time Gentlemen Please*, written by Bryony Lavery, marked the first large change in the make-up of the company. Roger, Helen and Josefina left, so we auditioned musicians to replace them. We wanted to do a show about sex. And physical appearance. When Stephanie Howard was designing the costumes for *Floorshow* we discussed the appearance question endlessly. How could a woman look attractive without making herself into a sex object? We wanted, above all, not to deny our physical entities. Could we do this without exploiting our bodies? What was attractive anyway?

In the end, we went for bright, colourful, attractive yet sexless costumes. It was a solution, (although we were still attacked for them being 'too sexy') but somehow we all felt we'd avoided an issue rather than confronting it.

One of the objectives in *Time Gentlemen Please* was to try and challenge more directly the audience's (and our own) perception of female physical sexuality. Was a liberated woman allowed to be glamorous? Could women and men be equally glamorous? What might that look like?

These were questions which were as pertinent in our lives as on the stage. Perhaps because we mostly came from a background of professional theatre where we were used to costume and the idea of costume as something that was fluid and could be played with, we were personally never happy disowning our bodies under the androgynous uniform of dungarees. Of course we all wore dungarees at one time or another, but we were also the company that once did a get-out in cocktail dresses and high heels because we were on our way to a party and didn't have time to change. In the written material of the show itself, the company was again challenging the received idea of female sexuality, and in particular female passivity in sexual relationships. (Not a new interest of ours. *Vinegar Tom* opens with a scene of a woman and a man having sex. We were insistent that the woman was very obviously *on top*.)

This was another occasion where a lot of people failed to get the joke. Or rather, failed to get the intensely serious purpose behind the joke. And, infamously, there was 'Leeds.'

A performance of *Time Gentlemen Please* at the Trades Club in Leeds was 'zapped'; literally stopped in the middle by a group of angry women and gay and left-wing activists. I wasn't in *Time Gentlemen Please*, but the descriptions of what happened were vivid. Angry women (and men) pulled the leads out of the amplifiers and speakers, climbed onto the stage and demanded that the performers get off. Chris refused to be terrorised into leaving the stage and finished the monologue she had been in the middle of. Mary then insisted on performing the last poem in the show. It was a traumatic experience: people screaming and shouting, arguing, crying. At the time, the reactions from both the zappers and the zapped was so emotional that it was impossible to make out exactly what it was that was being objected to. Confusing, too, because there seemed to be some kind of leftist factional in-fighting going on. Someone was screaming from the back, 'Tell me what your politics are and then I'll listen to you'

... 'Someone else, infuriated by the interruption was shouting 'Doesn't anybody here understand irony . . .' ?' The company offered to have a proper meeting in the next nearest venue so that the debate could be thrashed out in a less fraught atmosphere. Correspondence in *The Morning Star* attempted to clarify the issues on both sides. In reply to an attack on the show Susan Todd, who had directed the show, wrote that the women performers:

'deconstruct their traditional mode of stage presence and abandon coyness, terror and self-doubt for a direct expression of sexuality . . . that particular form of transformation was fought for very hard and it represents a victory for each woman over self-denigration.'

(Letter from Susan Todd, 28 November 1978.)

The incident was in one sense simply part of the flavour of the times. At conferences, women were often heckled or forced off the stage. We frequently heard tales of other companies being heckled or stopped. Intolerance and factionalism of the left was rampant at the time. Nor was feminism immune. 'Get-it- Rightism', one of the least savoury heirlooms passed on to us by the patriarchs of the left, flourished. In the end, it proved to be a poisonous heritage, encouraging the most narrowing kind of self- censorship.

A performer or speaker puts herself in a position of power just by being on a stage. An authoritarian figure, she is probably experiencing herself at her *least* powerful and most terrified, but the audience is unable to perceive this, unless she makes herself obviously vulnerable. When one of the women in *Time Gentlemen Please* was so upset by what had happened that she began to cry (off-stage) one of her accusers immediately put her arms around her and was clearly amazed that the performer should be so distressed.

This event had a profound effect on all of us within the company. In the preparation for the show, the company had spent many hours discussing in detail and with great openness their own sexual lives. Bryony wanted to work as much as possible from the truth of the performers' experiences. So to be attacked in this way was not simply an attack on the politics of the show; they experienced it as an attack on themselves, personally. There was probably no way the audience would have been able to perceive this, because by the time it arrived on stage, the experience had been turned into something other, more distant from the performers' own lives by the process of making it into

art. Yet the show clearly hit some of the nerves it was meant to. One of the disrupters had been shouting, 'We talk about these things in our women's groups but we don't want it thrown at us from the stage.'

In *Floorshow* we had aimed at a kind of rough and tumble style, which confronted the audience directly. If they shouted at us, we could shout back at them. I remember at one point combing through joke books to memorise put-downs for hecklers. 'Oh here's one alcoholic who isn't anonymous.' *Time Gentlemen Please* was intended to be ironic and sophisticated, more of a theatre show than *Floorshow*, and had no space for any kind of audience participation built into it. Consequently, the performers were helpless when the heckling started. There was no mechanism in the structure of the show which would have enabled us to control the audience reaction.

Aside: there had been accusations that only the women were dressed glamorously. This was quite untrue. Clive wore a white tuxedo and looked so glamorous that at a performance to a weekend school for women shop stewards the audience reaction was uproarious to say the least.

---

*And what did we do after the show, we supremely arrogant and disregarding actors? Well, we did the get-out of course. Back down the stairs and into the van. Then we went back to our extremely seedy digs and sat around on the floor in someone's room trying to work out what went wrong. I seem to remember sitting in the dark. Perhaps we were afraid that our fans had followed us. I remember being very cold and depressed, and when I finally got up to stumble off to my own room there was a click and my back went out – the end to a perfect day.*

CHRIS BOWLER

*Company Member, Performer, Writer, Director, 1975 to the present.*

---

A few days after the event, Beatrix Campbell, a great supporter of our work, wrote to the company:

'Dear Monstrous Regiment,  
This is a fan letter which I'm writing, having been

stunned to hear the news that people broke up your show in Leeds the other night.

I'd at first assumed, clearly quite wrongly, that it was some National Front or Festival of Light types, being puritanical thugs, and was then stunned again to hear that it was feminists who did it.

And that made me think a bit about why I'd so enjoyed your show.

Now I'd like to tell you why I liked it, if it helps, because you were probably shattered by the Leeds experience. The first thing to say is that I've seen it a couple of times, with largely feminist - lesbian and heterosexual - audiences who loved it. Actually loved it. Why? Firstly I think because it is very polished, very funny and very radical. And these days you've got to go a long way to get that combination.

The second reason I think is because it takes sexual politics back into a idiom which is *typical*, i.e. it takes it out of the ghettos of men's culture, and it takes it out of the feminist ghetto too, where too often we make massive and inept assumptions about how the sexual contradictions are lived among masses of people, and about how far we in the Women's Movement have actually changed anything. I don't think that's true of the mainstream of the WLM, which is much more rooted in reality; I suppose I'd count myself as part of that - and indeed I'd count the Monstrous Regiment sisters as part of that Women's Liberation mainstream as well.

So it was an enormous relief to have a feminist critique of sexuality presented in a form that was a pleasure both to self-conscious feminists, and to women who'd not identify themselves in that way, but who nevertheless are fighting it out. Another important reason was that it was about heterosexuality. By which I mean it made heterosexuality problematic. The absence of a full homosexual dimension is, I think, a problem.

I think homosexuality would have been incredibly difficult to present in this show because for it to have been problematic in an equivalent way to heterosexuality would be extremely hard to get right; in other words it wouldn't have been much cop to have nasty old heterosexuality having its guts ripped out in *Time Gentlemen Please*, only to have homosexuality immunised from criticism. I don't

think it would have been appropriate for a company like you, however, to take on such a critique, not at this stage anyway when gay politics and homosexuality in general in this country is still relatively besieged, still a fragile flower. If you'd had a confident gay caucus in the company then that would have been different.

One of the problems with the show in my view is in fact that the references to homosexuality are rather too bland and sentimental. I'd rather have not had them, I think.

Much happier with the querying and parodying of heterosexuality - this is the first show I've seen that dares to take that on.'

I think Beatrix identified the collision correctly. In wanting to be *truthful* about sex and sexual experience, the company felt it was legitimate for them to deal only with what they knew personally. As there were no lesbians or gay men in the company that workshopped and performed *Time Gentlemen Please*, they decided that it would be improper to speak of homosexuality on the stage. What was intended as a subversion and explosion of heterosexuality must have looked like celebration to lesbians and gay men who were looking for affirmation and support in their struggle against oppression. It also has to be said that when people are angry, objectivity goes out of the window and the angry groups in the audience were unable to see the intentional irony of the show.

The issues highlighted by the events in Leeds reverberated in the company for a long time. Towards the end of the tour we had a painful meeting at which there was a clear difference of opinion between those who were in the show and those who were not (of whom I was one) as to what 'Leeds' meant in terms of the show itself and the company in general. Because of what had happened, and the emotions attached to the event, it was almost impossible to have any objective discussion about it. Those who had been there found that any criticism from other members of the collective became tangled up with the emotion of the attack. Looking back now, I think it is a measure of the company's strength that we were able to agree (not without pain) to differ, and that the incident didn't lead to a split or a 'putsch'.

In 1979 the company faced a major crisis, when certain important links with the past were severed and it took a new direction. At the beginning of the year we toured *Teendreams*, a 'retrospective look at ten years of the Women's Movement.' Susan Todd and David Edgar wrote it and Kate Crutchley came in to

direct it. For the first time, we had no live music in a play. The idea was to use pop records as a means of tracing the passing of time over the ten years the play covered. Although we were happy with the piece, it didn't have quite the pzazz of previous work, and some of the critics thought it worthy but a bit dull. Perhaps we needed the cushion of live music to give us the bounce that the audiences had come to associate with the company's work.

We also had two projects in preparation. Caryl Churchill was commissioned to write another play. She was interested in seeing if there was any way of bringing together women from different historical periods and letting them talk to each other. In the minutes of our first discussion with her 'Dull Gret, Pope Joan, Pocahontas, a Japanese courtesan, Isabella Bird etc.' are mentioned. None of us had any idea how their meeting might be accomplished, but we hoped we might discover that in workshops. *Ms. Dante's Inferno* was floated as a possible title. When we came to do the workshops with Caryl we also introduced Florence Nightingale, Ruth Ellis (the last woman to be hanged in England) and Jane Anger (a possibly apocryphal contemporary of Shakespeare's who dressed as a man and went round fighting duels).

Then Susan Todd and David Bradford had conceived what we thought was the brilliant idea of following Caryl's play with a 'Season of Classic Plays'. We were getting very tired. Non-stop touring, crummy damp B & Bs, being away from home for weeks at a time were beginning to depress us. What about a season, in London, in which we would put on, deconstruct, three classics from the theatrical repertoire? It would mean we could stop touring for a few months while continuing to work. And as our ensemble was beginning to look a little ragged at the edges, it would mean we might be able to persuade actors who were interested in our work, but who wouldn't tour, or actors who had been part of the company but didn't want to tour any more, to join us on a temporary basis.

---

*You called my bluff, backed me up. Much support, loving, chivvying all the way, but by the end I thought I'm too old to work in a rehearsal room where I can see my breath on a cold day.*

PAOLA DIONISOTTI  
Performer The Fourth Wall, 1983.

---



We hired the theatre in the club attached to the Methodist Church in the Walworth Road, Elephant & Castle, and printed leaflets advertising *'Women Beware Women* by Thomas Middleton, *Phaedra* based on Robert Lowell's translation of Racine's *Phedre* and Euripides' *Hippolytus*, and *The Man of Mode* by George Etherege.'

Then we made a disastrous foray into the grave labelled 'devised writing'. There is a gap in the minutes of the company meetings between March and September 1979, so there is no record of how or why we did it. A fit of communal lunacy probably. Caryl had hit a block. (The ideas she was working on eventually re-emerged in a different form in *Top Girls*.) But we had a tour booked, a schedule of gigs and no show. We had to come up with something fast. Of all the things we might have done, we abandoned all our principles about working with writers, and decided to adapt Anita Loos' novel *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*. The idea itself was inspired. We were always looking to do the unexpected. This was certainly a candidate in that category. The notion of a feminist company adapting this particular novel struck us as highly amusing.

We were probably led astray by the success of *Scum*, forgetting that in that case, Claire and Chris had created a substantial basis of structure and narrative, a vision from which we worked. Here we were starting with a book. A very different proposition. The show was a glorious disaster. Real twenties beaded frocks, the Ritz Hotel Paris, the Statue of Liberty on roller skates. It had all the ingredients of an absurd farce, but it never worked. It was too long. It was incoherent. Too many people had a hand in writing it. We toured it during the summer, miserable, pretending that it was alright, but fraying tempers and a bad atmosphere in the van told us that it wasn't. That version of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* met its Waterloo at the Communist University Summer School in London University (where we had previously performed *Scum* to great acclaim) to an audience that not only didn't see the joke, but hated it. As the interminable torture of the evening dragged on for three bottom-numbing hours (even after we thought we had cut half an hour out of it), and the only sound we could hear was the sound of people leaving, we realised it was the end of civilisation as we knew it. After the performance, a great friend and supporter of the company came into the dressing room and murmured 'Darlings . . . the curtain call . . . how brave . . .' We knew it was curtains for us. Bad shows can have a disastrous effect on companies and this one was a stinker.

However bleakly funny it seems in retrospect, the show and particularly that performance was a watershed in that it provoked a major crisis which split the company and marked the end of the first phase of its life.

---

*The great thing was, those early productions seemed to answer the hitherto unspoken needs of a large audience. It wasn't just the plays and their subject matter, it was also us - the women on stage. Everything seemed so very much in the present, nothing was reflective. The play and the costumes might be historical, but the electricity was now; and the now was also us using the best of ourselves and our skills to map out a new place for women to be. We said it was centre stage, but there were occasions it felt more like the front line. We had no history, we only had a future.*

MARY McCUSKER  
 Company Member, Performer, 1975 to the present.  
 Executive Director, 1990-1991.

---

.....

### **Gentlemen Prefer Blondes (Mark Two)**

The split centred on the issue of survival: had the company come to the end of its useful life? Did the disaster of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* mean we had nothing more to say? On one side the belief that the company should retire on its laurels and disband. On the other, the belief that to stop now would leave us all with a very bitter taste in the mouth. There's more to life than one rotten show. Besides, we had a thousand three-colour posters we had to do something with.

Rather shakily, we began to put ourselves back together. We weren't certain whether we could resurrect ourselves without the ones who had left. In particular, we weren't sure how we would manage without Susan Todd whose intellect and passion had been a guiding force in the first years. Bryony Lavery rescued us by going back to the novel and starting all over again. She had the idea of making the show a dialogue between 'then' and 'now'. It wasn't so much an adaptation of the book as a series of comic variations with music.

## I INTRODUCTION

We went through a lengthy process of interviewing performers to join the company. We still identified ourselves as a functioning collective, and we weren't interested in actors who would come in and perform in one show. It was join up for fifty-two weeks a year or nothing.

*Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* Mark Two turned out to be one of the most popular shows we ever produced. We toured it through the autumn and into the following spring. Audiences loved it. When we performed for a week at the Citizens Theatre in Glasgow they had to open the gallery, so many people turned up. They may have been suckered into thinking they were getting some sort of version of Marilyn Monroe and Jane Russell, but once we started, who cared about those two dames?

Stylistically it was a new departure for us, which may explain why we made such a mess of it before when we'd tried to do it without a writer. Previously, the theatre shows had taken on serious themes in a sober style. The comic side of our work was expressed through the cabarets. Now we were trying to bring the two together.

The Season of Classic plays was abandoned, partly because all our energy had to be spent on getting the company up and running again, partly because it felt wrong to put on work which had been the brainchild of Susan who was no longer part of the company.

Ironically, although *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* Mark Two was a great success, we were left at the end of the tour feeling completely demoralised. Some of this was plain exhaustion. To balance the books we'd had to tour it for longer than we really wanted to. (Mark One had spent a lot of money and made very little income.) We wore it and ourselves into the ground. Some of the depression came from sheer misery and grief. Angela Hopkins, the director of Mark Two, was killed in a car crash on her way to the show part way through the tour. We had to try and process the painful feelings surrounding that tragedy while we continued to tour. At the end of the run we decided to take three months off; to give ourselves the space to assess our situation and plan the future.

.....