



1985-1990 Collective Management

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.

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Gradually, over a period of time in the early 1980s, we came to the conclusion that we would be a women-directed company performing plays with all women casts except when the play absolutely required male characters, in which case we would employ male actors.

Secondly we came to the conclusion that from now on, we the performers would not have an automatic right to be in all productions. We were coming into the ambit of more conventional theatre rules, which meant, for example, that we would have to cast plays taking the age of the characters into account. We would also have to be sensitive to the fact that guest directors might think Mary or I, the only performers remaining in the collective, weren't suited to a part even if we wanted to do it.

This issue surfaced several times between 1986 and 1988: Susan Todd came back to work with us and direct *My Song is Free* (1986) which both Mary and I had wanted to be in. But in the end we decided with Sue that we weren't right for the parts. And in *Waving* (1988) a co-production with the Sheffield Crucible Theatre, which Carol Bunyan had actually written with Mary and me in mind,

we reluctantly had to concede that the play would work better cast with performers who really were the same age as the characters.

Mary had been in *Alarms* (1986), a play we commissioned from the American writer Susan Yankowitz which dealt with the post- Chernobyl landscape. This one did have male characters in it. In addition to touring England, we were invited to the Boston Women's Theatre Festival in the United States where it was a great success.

Taking our production of Alarms to the USA, where we were participating in the Boston Women in Theatre Festival, 1987, was an exhilarating experience. I had never attended such a festival before - a broad mixture of women performers playing to predominantly female audiences, which were hugely rumbustious and enthusiastic in their response to most of the work on offer. Our play was written by the American poet/playwright/novelist, Susan Yankowitz, and I felt that it was really only in the USA that the humour and particularly American voice of the play was communicated and understood - this despite the fact that we were performing Alarms in British accents. My abiding memory of the festival was the hunger of its audiences - women who were there to feast on a small but rich harvest which bore the fruit of their own experiences. We were given the most warm reception by our American hosts and audiences, who seemed to respect Monstrous Regiment as something close to a grandmother of women's theatre from over the Atlantic.

GERDA STEVENSON
Performer, *Alarms*, 1986-1987.

Both Wendy Kesselman's *My Sister in This House* (produced 1987) and Jenny McLeod's *Island Life* (1988) were plays with which we were closely involved as producers but which had no actual members of *Monstrous Regiment* performing in them.

During the 1980s the company was in a constant state of balance/friction in our dealings with the writers we commissioned. We were often uncertain ourselves about how to deal with the changing world around us. This blurring of our own certainties coupled with a desire not to trample on the writers' creative process I think meant we often didn't give them a clear enough sense of what the company's philosophy and ideas were. So when

we approached writers we were interested in, we usually simply asked them to write about what they wanted to write about. A radical change from the days when we breathed down the writers' necks for months on end. In the argument about whether a play is a feminist play just because it is written by a woman and speaks of woman's experience, we were taking the side that said 'yes'. It was a change that we were only partially conscious of. In the absence of a clear picture of where the Women's Movement was going, we were as confused as everyone else as to what the plays we were performing should be saying. Our feeling was that if we couldn't point with any certainty to the way forward, then we had simply to support and encourage women writers. Keeping women's work in the public eye is no easy task in itself.

In the mid to late 1980s we were trying to reflect the changing world as we were experiencing it. Nothing new there. But we were experiencing it as painfully hard. As I've already mentioned, politically it was a nightmare, and feminism, in retreat like the left, was having to do some pretty fast footwork just to stay in the same place. Writers, of course, were no more immune from the feeling of confusion than we were. So the writing of the period reflects the withdrawal from the arena of public struggle. The dilemma for a company such as ours is how to balance the desire to take on the whole world against a desire to rescue the domestic lives of women from the dustbin marked 'trivial, unimportant'.

One of the issues we were becoming concerned with was the question of growing older. We noticed that opportunities for women performers get very thin on the ground after the age of forty or so, and we began to think that one of our concerns should be consciously to produce work about and for women of our own generation. The shift in emphasis can be seen in the change from *My Song is Free* and *Alarms*, both produced in 1986, one about women in detention in Pinochet's Chile, and the other tackling the destruction of the environment, to the plays we produced in the following two years which dealt with more personal, individual concerns.

We had been looking for an already existing script. In the changing economic climate, theatres were beginning to want to read the script of a show before they would book it. The birth process of a new play doesn't always conform to the strict timetable required by administrators and bookers, and we wanted to have a script we could let people read while we developed our commissions.

My Sister in This House had been performed several times in America by the time someone sent us the script. We couldn't understand why it had never been seen in this country. It is an extraordinary piece of drama: dense, claustrophobic, creating, second by second, the tiny mind-numbingly boring details of a suffocating provincial society. The play is based on an actual event that took place in France. The same actual event that Jean Genet used as the springboard for *The Maids*.

My Sister in This House was co-produced with the Leicester Haymarket Theatre, did a short tour and then played at the Hampstead Theatre. It provided us with a wonderful example of the pitfalls waiting for small scale alternative companies when they get involved with mainstream organisations. One of the reasons we had picked this particular play was we knew that it was a tried and tested piece of theatre. It was the most mainstream play we had done for a while, and we wanted to use it as a means of putting the name Monstrous Regiment back in the public eye. We achieved much of what we set out to do. Nancy Meckler directed a stunning production which had excellent reviews. However, we didn't manage to get the name of the company onto the London poster in large enough print, with the result that everyone thought that it was a Hampstead Theatre production, the critics referred to it as such, and we were rendered totally invisible.

In the Spring of 1986 we rehearsed Wendy Kesselman's play My Sister in This House. Set during the thirties in a provincial French city, the play took its story from real life events. Two sisters, live-in servants since their adolescence, brutally murdered and severely mutilated their mistress and her daughter after serving them faithfully and devotedly for seven years. Within the confines of a rigidly bourgeois social framework, Wendy's play examined the minutiae of these four women's lives. Amazingly Madame and Isabelle Danzard manage to conduct their lives virtually without speaking to the two girls who serve their every need.

The rehearsal process became a fascinating journey for us all. Susanna Hamilton and Maggie O'Neill, playing the sisters Christine and Lea, were sent out to spend a day with professional cleaners (who turned out to be sisters!). Each morning while Maggie Steed, Tilly Vosburgh and myself had coffee, Susanna and Maggie scrubbed and cleaned the rehearsal room. Countless improvisations inspired by clues in the text and an extended interview with a psychiatrist made it possible to create a palpable history and milieu for each of the four

women. What were the circumstances of life and character that could push these shy, gentle, loyal women to perform acts of such extreme violence. The more questions we asked, the more aware we became of the passionate nature of each of the four women, and their inherent sense of loneliness. We saw how their needs, when thwarted or unfulfilled, could manifest themselves in a desperate, possessive kind of loving. It was then we began to glimpse how the final tragic events in the play could have come to pass.'

NANCY MECKLER

Director, *My Sister in This House*, 1986.

In 1988 we produced *Waving* by Carol Bunyan and *Island Life* by Jenny McLeod. *Waving* reflected our interest in the process of growing older, the characters being around fifty. As one of them remarks, 'Well, Joan Collins is fifty, but not the same sort of fifty'.

We knew of Jenny McLeod through her prize-winning play *Cricket at Camp David*. She was then in her very early twenties and the quality of her writing was so impressive that we asked her to write a new play for us. We had been thinking about working from both ends of the spectrum as it were, reflecting the concern of our own (mid-forties) generation, and at the same time looking for younger women authors, of a different generation, to see what they were thinking about.

We were amazed to find that what Jenny most wanted to do was to write a play about old ladies. The process by which the play was produced was relatively conventional. Once we had agreed on the subject with her, she went away and wrote it. Thereafter Jane Collins, the director, worked closely with Jenny on subsequent drafts and rewrites.

Island Life, set in the wilderness of an old people's home, spends a weekend with Emmy, Sophia and Vera as they go about setting up an experiment to recreate or visit the (non-existent?) past. Their ritualised relationship is shattered by the intrusion of Kate, an accidental tourist in their fantasy life. The resulting mayhem as 'truth' clashes with 'illusion' is both comic and heart rending. *Island Life* is certainly no naturalistic examination of the problems of old age. More, it is a kind of metaphysical meditation on the nature of truth and illusion. But it isn't didactic either. The characters are drawn in exuberant detail, and the language of the play is rich in the vocabulary and history of each of the women.

The play was a co-production with the Nottingham

Playhouse, first performed in a new studio space the theatre was opening. It made for appalling working conditions for the performers and the director, not to mention the set designer, Iona McLeish, trying to open a new (and difficult) play against a background of last minute furious building work. Early in the following year, the production did a short tour and played in London with two changes in the cast.

A Common Woman (originally produced by the Sheffield Crucible Theatre), an evening of three short plays by Franca Rame and Dario Fo, and *Beatrice* by Ian Brown, two one-woman shows we produced in 1989, brought Mary and me back into performing with the company (*A Common Woman* won a 1989 Time Out/01-for London Award) and at the beginning of 1990 we produced *Love Story of the Century*.

Love Story of the Century is a long autobiographical poem by Marta Tikkanen whose husband, a celebrated Finnish writer, was an alcoholic. The poem describes, sometimes in harrowing detail, the story of their life together, from the day they fell in love-at-first-sight, through their marriage, as he, always a heavy drinker, gradually descends into a pit of alcohol and destroys their relationship.

What is remarkable about the poem is its almost clinical recording of every nuance of feeling they went through: passionate love to loathing and every emotion in between. Nor does the author spare herself. Although alcoholism is plainly held responsible for the chaos of their lives, she acknowledges and charts her own unconscious participation in the mayhem.

Once we read the poem, we were shocked at our own insularity in never having even heard of it. It had originally been published in 1978, and since then had been dramatised and performed all over Europe (more than twenty productions in ten years.) There was, as far as we knew, no one theatrical version. We knew that it was sometimes performed as a one-woman show; we also found out that a production in Sweden had used three women and a man. We asked Clare Venables (who directed *Beatrice* and is skilled at cutting and shaping a text in rehearsal) to direct a dramatised version of the poem. She said she would, but only if we commissioned an adaptation first. She didn't want to cut and shape this one in rehearsal. In the event, her commitments elsewhere meant that she couldn't be with us during the rehearsal period, so we asked her to do the adaptation. Debbie Shewell directed it.

In deciding to construct a play with two performers we were wanting to explore the idea of the woman as divided self. She often knows what she 'ought' to do but cannot. In the later years of the marriage she is constantly at war with herself: should she leave him or not? Is she capable of leaving him? The poem is not as simplistic as this, however, and when we were working on it in rehearsal we found the division of text between the two voices didn't always fall into that obvious kind of inner conflict. When we came to patches in the adaptation that we didn't think worked, we went back to the poem and took out or put back verses or sections. The text printed here is the text as we eventually performed it.

When Marta came to London for the first night, we discovered to our horror that there was in fact an authorised dramatisation already in existence. In all the correspondence with her Swedish agent they had never thought to mention it, and we had never thought to ask. Fortunately she liked what we had done, and it is with her permission that our version is printed here.

We have included our stage directions to give readers some idea of what the production looked like. They are by no means an integral part of the text, and anybody performing the play will want to find their own style of production.

In 1990 the company also produced *More Than One Antoinette* written and directed by Debbie Shewell, an exploration of the life and death of the first Mrs Rochester, drawing on Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* and Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*. We also produced Marivaux's one-act play *The Colony* with a second act or companion piece, *Comes a Cropper*, written by Robyn Archer. The latter was a co-production with the Salisbury Playhouse, directed by Nona Shepphard, music composed by Lindsay Cooper.

Hanging on in the Eighties

What had the Monstrous Regiment set out to do in 1975? Among other things we wanted:

To produce great shows.

To discover and encourage women writers.

To explore a theory of feminist culture. 'What is a feminist play?'

To resurrect women's 'hidden history'.

To give women opportunities for work - especially in technical areas which had always been male preserves.

To put *real* women on the stage. No more stereotypes.

To be a consciousness-raising group.

To attempt a theory and practice of collectivity.

To find a new audience.

To explore the relationship between music and theatre.

And where did the 1980s leave us?

Post feminism and the free play of market forces. While red-braced Porsche-driving yuppies were let loose to roam the floor of the commodities market, and successful career women were falling over themselves to deny they even knew what that nasty word 'feminism' meant, what place was there for these old lady dinosaurs who would keep banging on about sisterhood and solidarity? What place was there for the word 'sisterhood' itself when the cult of unrestrained individualism told us that any woman could be Prime Minister if she had the guts and worked hard enough?

Against a backdrop of cuts in arts funding, rampant inflation that eroded the value of what grants we did get, and the dismemberment of the political theatre movement, survival was the name of the game. On the practical day-to-day level, running a theatre company became more and more of a struggle. We fought to maintain our standards of production, which, ironically, often caused painful tensions with women who came to work with us: from the outside we looked like a glossy company with a huge internal support network. From the inside, we looked like what we really were: a tiny group who didn't have enough women to do the work and didn't have the money to pay other people to come in and do it.

In such a difficult material position, the only way to continue to grow and develop is with the support of the community in which you are rooted. But in the 1980s our community fell apart. The Women's Movement retreated in confusion and we all suffered under the backlash of so-called 'post feminism'. (An interesting note. In her book *The Demon Lover: A Study of the Sexuality of Terrorism*, Robin Morgan found the expression 'post-feminist' being used as far back as 1919. So the idea that women should shut up and go home because they've fulfilled all their aspirations is not a new one.) Post-feminism is a spurious concept. As Naomi Wolf has recently pointed out 'no one speaks derisively about post-democracy'. Ten years of Thatcherism have shown us that

our democratic rights are not sacred. They have to be defended and fought for and a society that cares about its political institutions has to be constantly vigilant in defence of those rights.

This scramble for survival has meant that there has been very little chance to evaluate the theatrical implications of our work. In our continuing championing and performing of women's writing, the actual producing of the work has been such a battle in the 1980s that we have been forced to put one of our primary aims on the back boiler. The conscious exploration of what 'women's writing' is or might be has had to be postponed. This is still a project of some urgency. There seems to be a growing consensus of opinion that 'new writing' is in crisis, but the articles and papers which talk about this crisis never mention women's writing. As usual the dominant (male) is deemed to include the less visible female. It never seems to cross male critics' minds that women are not a special interest group, not a caucus, not a lobby.

We are not even a minority. Women make up just over half the human race, and it is inevitable that we begin to explore what might constitute a specific female vision. Not just in terms of content, but in the structure of the drama we write. In June 1991 I attended the 2nd International Women Playwrights' Conference in Toronto and I was struck by the way many of the women writers talked about their work. They are consciously thinking about what makes their plays different from the classical (male) form. They are acutely aware of having embarked on an exploration. Of course we have continued to commission and champion women's work of all kinds, but economic conditions force us into a conservative position. We have had to form a relationship with establishment theatre which I suspect has not always been to our advantage. In commissioning plays we have had to use the traditional model, but we have none of the safeguards that traditional methods provide: almost without exception we have tried to produce every play we have commissioned, whether we thought it was ready or not, because we never had enough money to build up a body of work in preparation. In contrast, mainstream theatres may have up to twenty-five commissions in various stages of development at any one time. Out of those commissions, each theatre may go on to produce only four or five.

Where does a company such as ours find its place in the theatrical community, when mainstream, male-run theatres such as the Royal Court provide a more visible stage for women playwrights to work on? Indeed, it's probable that none of the

writers in this volume would like to be thought of as 'women writers', laden as that description is with resonances of the marginal and, by extension, the second rate.

Yet women are writing for the theatre. More now than ever before. But by and large they are still as invisible as they ever were. They are not being nurtured. With the closure of many studio spaces and smaller venues a traditional testing ground for new writing has been lost. Additionally, new writing itself has become harder and harder to put on as cuts in arts funding and a recession push bookers and producers into a more conservative position of producing safe plays. When critics like Michael Billington wail at the 'crisis in new writing' they never seem to grasp the obvious correlation between the 'crisis' and the economic situation in which theatre operates.

Not enough has changed in the last fifteen years. We were a group of performers and we started out looking for women writers as a way of making ourselves visible on stage. Enlightened self-interest. Mel Gussow, distinguished American critic and writer, recently wrote a long profile of Michael Gambon for *The New Yorker* (28 January, 1991). The article mentions the stars of the English stage: Ian McKellen, Alan Howard, Derek Jacobi . . . and on and on . . . and the new generation . . . Daniel Day-Lewis, Antony Sher, Simon Callow, Kenneth Branagh . . . Not one woman. You'd think Oliver Cromwell was still in Whitehall and women banished from the stage altogether.

It is still the case that for most theatrical purposes the male shall be deemed to include the female. As long as the male vision of the world is taken to be *the* vision of the world then women's writing will be identified as marginal. And many women will want to wriggle out of the identity their gender imposes on them. Understandably.

Fear of being marginalised: an issue that comes full circle again. What is the point of a women's theatre company? Shouldn't we rejoin the mainstream and try and infiltrate what we've learned into the body theatrical?

Being a woman designer I found it very comfortable working in a company that takes the concerns and interests and struggles women have seriously. The writing for women, by women with good parts for women of different ages. They are not separatist or judgmental but simply care for and take the art of women particularly seriously. When I work for them I feel appreciated and enabled. There may not

be a fantastic budget to work with but I feel valued and that is enhancing.

Recently I have approached them for new plays to run a project with new design students at Central St Martin's Theatre Design degree course. Young designers work on unperformed, maybe unfinished, plays. It can be helpful for a writer to see their play visualized and set in a proposed space before completing it. I hope this will be an ongoing relationship.

JENNY CAREY

Designer, Origin of the Species, 1984, The Colony Comes a Cropper, 1990.

Part of the problem of women's theatrical invisibility has to lie in the classical foundations of our repertoire. Shakespeare pre-eminently, but also Marlowe, Jonson, the Jacobean, the Restoration playwrights. The model theatre company, the ideal, is one which can tackle and scale these heights of the English cultural experience. And a company which is geared up to do *Macbeth* (21 male characters, 5 female) or *Hamlet* (at least 20 male characters, 2 female) is hardly likely to be considering how they might employ more women.

Interestingly enough, two of the most celebrated examples of 'tinkering' with gender in classic texts were the National Theatre's *As You Like It* (1968) and *The Oresteia* (1981) both of which were performed by all-male casts. In other words, even with so few parts in the classical repertoire for women, what few there were were taken from them and given to men. Why? The rationale was that these plays were written for men to perform at times when women were not allowed on a public stage. But what was the real reason? Are men inherently more interesting than women on stage? Are they better actors than women? Does the deep authoritative male voice appeal to the audience more than women's voices? Or do they make more convincing women than women themselves? I was told a story about how Samuel Beckett reputedly refused to allow *Waiting for Godot* to be performed at all in Holland because a certain theatre, contrary to his wishes, performed it with an all-female cast. What terrible damage could four women inflict on this play that such a punishment should be meted out to an entire nation? Had they fouled it, besmirched it, somehow rendered it invalid? If Shakespeare can survive strobe lighting, motor bikes and Sherman tanks, can Beckett not survive being performed by women?

The physical invisibility of women on stage is only the manifestation of our invisibility in the whole theatrical edifice. That is why the women's theatre companies have to keep fighting for their right to exist. Fifteen years ago, we were looking forward to the day when we could pack up and go home knowing that women's experience, women's vision, women's culture had become an acknowledged part of culture in general. Unfortunately we can't pack those cases yet.

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