



1990-1993 A New Beginning?

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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A New Beginning

To have survived for fifteen years is an achievement. The bigger achievement will be survival for the next fifteen years.

ROBERT BRECKMAN

Company Accountant, Advisory Committee Member 1975 -1991.

In 1991 the company has taken a radical leap in a new direction. The structure of the company has always been the motor which carried the artistic policies forward. Towards the end of the 1980s we started to admit that the collective management model was not working well. For each of us to earn a living, as the company couldn't support us, we had to take work wherever we were offered it. This created a situation where it was possible for the company to be in pre-production or rehearsal for a show and for the administrator to be the only member of the company who was physically present. The result was that the process of taking major decisions of policy became inefficient and occasionally haphazard. This left the administrator with the burden of taking many decisions alone which should have been taken collectively. Additionally, the management collective had dwindled to three (Mary, Chris and myself) plus Rose Sharp, our administrator, the only one of us on the permanent payroll.

We tried to tackle the problem by setting up an Advisory Committee. The Committee has made an important contribution to the company's life, supporting and challenging our activities, but it was never intended to be a management body, and as it meets only quarterly, it couldn't really help to resolve the problems of the day to day running of the company.

I have already talked about the vital role the company's

administrators played in the early days of its existence. The nature of that role changed radically during the 1980s when the full-time collective ceased to exist. The nature may have changed but the vital importance of the administrator did not. If anything, it became more crucial still.' After Diane Robson left us, first Sandy Bailey, then (briefly) Ferelith Lean and currently Rose Sharp have all had to cope with the problems posed by our attempts to keep the spirit and artistic standards of the company going without the full-time support of a collective that characterised the early days.

I had never heard of a business plan, a feasibility study or an arts strategy. I had no experience of marketing or financial management. But I was (still am) a committed feminist with ideas about how women on stage could blow a hole in the patriarchal hold on imagination and drama. I was actively involved in the Women's Movement and a whole range of cultural political groupings and activities. I was naive. misguided in many ways, but I was motivated, energetic and a fierce campaigner. I like to think that was why Monstrous Regiment asked me to work for them.

SUE BEARDON
Administrator, 1976-1978.

We gradually realised that we were 'ipso facto' forcing the role of artistic director on our administrators, who didn't want it. So when, in 1990, the Arts Council made continued funding dependent upon our appointing an Executive or Artistic Director, we were not greatly surprised. Nor, when we came to discuss it in depth, were we as aghast as we might have thought we would be.

Mary agreed to take the role of Executive Director for nine months while we sorted out how best to proceed. The work she did in those months was invaluable, indeed we probably wouldn't have survived at all if it hadn't been for her energy and skill. On the artistic side she oversaw the production of *The Colony* (with Rose) and organised workshops and rehearsed readings throughout the following six months in partnership with Tash Fairbanks, who was our first writer-in-residence. At the same time she produced a series of study papers which became our blue-print for survival.

Our discussions were guided by Sue Beardon, our very first administrator, now a management consultant, who came back to

help us to work through what we wanted to do. While still believing fiercely in the collective principle, we saw that in our situation, the renewal of the company and the company's work was the only thing that mattered. And perhaps 'collective' has other meanings than the one we had always assumed. We have always tried to be flexible at moments of crisis, to look for a course of action that would ensure the survival of the company and the ideas it stands for. So rather than cling on to a power it was no longer feasible for us to exercise, we decided that the appointment of an Artistic Director who would work side by side with the administrator, offered us an exciting chance to put the company back on its feet to face the challenges of the future.

Consequently, in April 1991, we appointed Clare Venables as our first Artistic Director. She had just spent nine years as Artistic Director of one of the largest regional theatres in England, The Sheffield Crucible, and we could hardly believe our luck when she agreed to work with us. Her relationship with the company over the years meant that she was familiar with our work, and with us. She had been on the Advisory Committee since its inception and had worked with us on two productions in the last couple of years. She had co-produced *Waving* when she was at the Crucible. We had also planned together (until we discovered that neither party could afford it) for the company to become resident in the Crucible Studio for a season.

It will take many different forms over the years, but their first principle of majority is more important than is ever stated; in this 'post-feminist' era there is a danger that people can feel many battles have been won, and that we do not still need women's companies, rather in the way that women's pages in newspapers are now questioned by men and women alike. It is short-sighted. Perhaps life might be technically easier for our daughters (though actually I doubt even that) but until we are as confident in our female perspective as in our male, whether we are men or women, we need groups of women, working and exploring together. Not individual women struggling or conquering alone, but groups, sharing and conquering, and eventually welcoming the male principle because the female principle has become strong enough to match it.

CLARE VENABLES
Artistic Director, 1991.

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With the addition of Katrina Duncan, who had known the company since 1979 when she worked with us on placement from the City University Arts Administration Course, and had been on the Advisory Committee, we formed ourselves into something approaching a conventional Board of Directors. I say 'something approaching' because I don't think any of us really sees what we are in the process of creating as a traditional structure. The word 'collective' may not look anything like it looked to us in 1975, but the resonances of the ideas it represents are still as strong. The last twenty years has had a profound effect on women's perception of ourselves. As Carolyn Heilbrun* says: 'What became essential was for women to see themselves collectively, not individually, not caught in some individual erotic and familial plot, and, inevitably, found wanting . . . I suspect that female narratives will be found where women exchange stories, where they read and talk collectively of ambitions, and possibilities, and accomplishments.'

We think we are ready to start telling the story all over again. Several years ago, David Bradford, one of the original group, told me about an expression he had found in a book on evolution. Apparently it is a technical term used to describe a species that is in the process of evolving. At a certain point in its development it is not possible to predict whether it will be successful or not. In the meantime, it is called a 'hopeful monster'. I think that isn't a bad way to describe how we feel about the company as we move into the 1990s. We are evolving into something quite different from what we have been. We acknowledge and salute that history and every person who contributed to its successes. At the same time, we recognise that we have to change in order to move on. We want to build on the past not live in it. We want the next fifteen years to be as extraordinary as the last fifteen have been. As we look into the future with anticipation we feel that we are indeed, 'hopeful monsters'.

* Carolyn Heilbrun: *Writing a Woman's Life*. WOMEN'S PRESS. 1989.