



Changes in the 1980s

Extract from an interview of
Gillian Hanna [GH] and Mary McCusker [MM] conducted by Jessica Higgs
[JH] for *Unfinished Histories* with Katrina Duncan [KD] for *Monstrous
Regiment* on 25 May 2016

The topics discussed in this extract relate mainly to the 1985-1990 section
of the History pages on this website, titled **Collective Management**.

The extract is taken from a near-verbatim transcript of the interview
produced by First Class Secretarial Services, with some parenthetical
[additions] and {comments} by the editor. Text removed is indicated by a
series of

A digital recording of the interview, in two Parts, each lasting about 2
hours, is lodged with the Monstrous Regiment archive in the V&A's
Theatre and Performance Archives.

Copies of the recording are also available in other locations, including the
British Library Sound Archive. Further details at
<http://www.unfinishedhistories.com/interviews/viewing-interviews/>

Time intervals (in minutes) in the recording are indicated by [5.00], [10.00]
and so on in the text.

JH: Was it harder to maintain the collective in the 80s, when key people weren't necessarily in the productions? Did that change it at all or were you still part of the collective?

MM: I think the collective *spirit* was harder to maintain, because there were quite a few shows... If I look at it now I think, I wasn't in that, but I was around. I did quite a lot of office work, for no money, because it was part of what needed to be done sometimes. The same with Gillian, Gillian would as well.

But for instance, for *Yoga Class* (1981), there were people {performers} who came in to do it. Now, Chris Bowler and John Slade {collective members} were in it. I wasn't in it, Gillian wasn't in it. Different people came in. And it was all very well saying to people that for this point in time they were part of the collective. But when they were sitting around the table and you're talking about a future show, you weren't necessarily saying that they were the people who were going to be in that next show.

GH: And that was partly because they didn't want to. It wasn't just an executive decision that we *made*. Quite a lot of actors, or in fact most actors that we worked with after that who came in, weren't interested in joining the collective.

MM: I mean people like Paola Dionisotti came in [for *The Fourth Wall* (1983)], but there's no way Paola would want to do [as much as] one show a year [with us], for instance. I mean she did that one show with us but didn't do...

I think one of the things that the 80s reflected was a change in the political climate, where people were thinking of *careers*, while the Arts Council's relationship to us was also looking at *us*, and going '*collective?*', do you know, and 'can you stop talking about socialism in politics in your funding applications?' We were on a revenue grant, but naturally you still had to be putting in your plans {for the upcoming years' work etc}

And it was in the 80s that the Arts Council started to object... *not* that we ever misused the money - and we were not in the red, we were always in the black, we actually *managed* the money incredibly well - but I can remember sitting in a meeting where it was brought to my attention very forcibly that we might be *managing* the money well, but as far as they were concerned we weren't *earning* enough.

And so we managed to make the money stretch. We were all still paid the same [as one another]. And I just want to say a bit about the money here, that... Administrators were paid throughout the year. We {Mary and Gillie and other collective members} would come in {to do company work, but unpaid}... And if you were doing a show you got paid for it. We all got paid the same when we were in doing the show. But our politics, and the process by which we kept saying everybody's important, was reflected in how we thought about money.

And so when *Mourning Pictures* (1981)... We did a radio production of that {as well as the stage one}. If the actors did something outside {the standard theatre work} like that, the actors' money was then taken and put into a pool and divided - try explaining that to the taxman - amongst everybody connected with the company. So that the administrators actually got some of *that* money. And I can remember arguing about that at the time.

I say this as a 'here I am, collective member', because at that time I wasn't earning any money, and I said 'but the administrator's getting paid weekly and I've got to share my radio fee, because I'm down on a separate contract for the radio'. And I felt quite gritty about that. As you can tell, money's always been... From my roots that was important, that I got paid for what I was doing. I kept thinking well, the taxman's never going to believe that I put the money into a pot.

But that idea of the equality {between everyone} was terribly, terribly important. But for the Arts Council, of course, I think it must have looked like... They thought we weren't professional enough about the finances. And so they were going, but yes, you had a £3,000 surplus - or at one point it went up to a £7,000 surplus - but you didn't *earn* enough. But of course some of the venues couldn't pay the kind of fees the Arts Council thought you should be getting, and we still had loyalty to a lot of the venues we'd go to.

We would open shows a lot of the time in Lowestoft [at The Swallow Theatre], which we had a nice relationship with. Which meant we didn't get a big fee from that week, but they let us do the tech there, which - I can see you nodding Jessica, you know what a boon that was, a place where you could actually do the tech, your dress run and open the show in the same place. That was something we didn't manage with *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* Mark Two (1979-80). I remember it very clearly - opened with three weeks of one-night stands. But Lowestoft was like...

[50.00] But the Arts Council, they'd look and go well, what did you earn there? A two-night fee for six days in one place? And they were putting more and more pressure on us, that (i), we weren't possibly giving enough money to administrators, that they shouldn't be getting paid the same rate as we were, and that (ii), we weren't actively trying to up our income.

And of course at the same time, the politics of the time were being reflected in *venues*, who were also less likely to be offering you [whole] weeks, or were more interested in half weeks. So I'm just saying that... The *times* were different, and I think we were reflecting the times. And a lot of actors were also thinking, financially, did they want to be part of a collective where you're committed, but not always on the payroll and less able to sign on and do something? Because that kind of pressure... Everything was changing.

And I can still remember an Arts Council meeting where someone said to me, aren't you feeling a bit *tired* for doing this now? Younger people... That our imagination and passion for the work was fading with our age. And I remember saying, red lipstick doesn't prove you're imaginative. It was a petty poke at a young person with very red lipstick, looking at me across the table saying aren't you tired? And I'm thinking yeah, I'm tired, I've done more one-night stands this week before this meeting.

But the times changed. I know you were saying, maybe we made decisions or people made... But sometimes the decisions came as part of a recognition...

GH: Oh yes.

MM: ...that you couldn't do the 52 weeks of the year always. I mean, I took time out, you took time out. But what you were coming back to was a realisation that oh, you couldn't phone Sheffield {Crucible Theatre} and get the [whole] week. And sliding into that, you were trying for co-productions. I mean *Origin of the Species* (1984-5) was the first co-production we ever did, Birmingham Rep, and then we had

Nottingham [for *Island Life* (1988-9)]. *My Sister in This House* (1987), Leicester we did that with. And more and more companies were finding ways...

And I took on a kind of producer role with *My Sister in This House*, and I actually wasn't up to it. But at that point there wasn't enough of the collective around to give the kind of professional backup [needed]. And if there was Google, like now, I'd have found somebody. But I didn't have that. And I can still remember looking at that poster [of *My Sister in This House*] at Hampstead Theatre and thinking, *where is our name?* And to see reviews that said... And it was a Monstrous Regiment Production, it was *ours*. We'd found it and we'd done it.

But the professionalism of the organisations you were dealing with, Hampstead included, the things that... Anyone doing copyright, or a proper theatrical agent checking how high your lettering is, it hadn't occurred to me. Because in the way that I still, as a self-employed person, operate with my theatre head - oh, I'll do that for you, for little money - I thought I was conversing with people who were on the same page as me.

GH: Never crossed our minds to check that poster.

MM: No.

GH: Of course they would put Monstrous Regiment on it. Where are we? We're not on the... And it was just a good lesson, though I'm not sure we had a chance to...

MM: Learn from it.

GH: ...to learn from it, but it was a good lesson in how you cannot let anything go by.

MM: But by the time they'd made the film of it we had even less rights. And then Nancy Meckler {who directed both stage and film versions} wrote to me to say look, I have managed to get a small mention for you in the film. And then that's... The times changed dramatically.

And in a way I kind of understood part of what the Arts Council were saying... I remember going on a one-day marketing course before *The Colony Comes a Cropper* (1990), and again, realised that we as a collective had sat and looked at the poster for *The Colony Comes a Cropper*, [and] we [had] liked it. We thought it was smashing. And you had to take something with you to this one-day marketing course. And I said we're really keen to attract a new audience with this [show]. Lindsay Cooper was doing the music.

[55.00] And so this person said to me okay, so what on the poster will be attracting this new audience? [And I looked at the poster and I thought, it's a very attractive poster, but they're absolutely right. There was nothing on the poster... It was a more conventional, quite nicely done - I'm not doing down the person. And we'd said fine to it, liked it. But actually it didn't do...]

And it was a very simple thing. And I learnt from that one-day course and it was too late to do more things with that. But sometimes if you don't ask yourself the right question... And I think that was the thing, that in those later years you didn't have as many voices sometimes around the table.

GH: Yes.

MM: You were making decisions perhaps more hurriedly. And yeah, it was a perfectly good poster. But these were more competitive times. And if you had gone to the trouble to get Lindsay Cooper, who'd come up with smashing music, and Robyn Archer, who was also a good name, to do a second half, tying this together, the poster should have been reflecting that. If anything it should have had Lindsay Cooper with a saxophone on a ship, rather than something...

Because Marivaux's name was being... And I thought me, at 17, 18, would I look and see this play by Marivaux? And if I didn't know Robyn Archer, why would I think it was necessarily something for me as a young woman? But I had rejected the Arts Council version of that, which was like, you're not thinking... So I understand where some of their stuff was coming from, but I think it's very difficult to respond as quickly to people who are maybe that three steps ahead of you, because let's face it, they've been working out those plans of what they're going to be doing with the money long term. Sorry, I've been talking a long time.

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MM: I'll just say this quickly... Having looked [recently] at Cheek by Jowl's website - because [we are] looking at websites - that it's so much easier when {like them} you've got two charismatic or one charismatic leader. The acting style of the company is established. People know what it is they're buying. And so that, with us, became far more difficult when you reached the 80s. What were people buying? And for some people, if Gillian and I weren't in it, it wasn't Monstrous Regiment. What were they buying? People were wanting to see scripts more. They wanted an *identity*.

And if your identity had been this big, bold thing - let's face it, you and I can be so loud, Gillie Hanna and I can be so loud you want to put a bag over our heads - but they were [now] confused as to what your company [was], apart from being feminist. And that, the feminist [element], people were saying well, what does it mean? What is the show going to be?

Whereas if you're Cheek by Jowl, people know what that show is going to be. I'm using them as... I was looking at their website [recently] and I thought, you've got people who have a relationship with the Barbican, who are being asked to direct plays in Russia, who have this strong relationship... Because *they* have stayed with it, with a style that they want. We had a style that we liked, but we didn't say to writers, this is the style you've got to write in to suit this company.

GH: It's true.

MM: Nor did we say right, who are three directors that would do this style? We never did this as a collective. We could've..... We'd say [to them], we're not asking you to be an artistic director, but you do this style we like, so you're going to sit in with us in the meetings that we do with these writers. We didn't do that kind of thing. We could've and we didn't, because indeed sometimes a collective sits back to think, hmm, it happens.

But it seems to me that to have survived the 80s properly we needed to have made some of *those* decisions, apart from saying how we wanted to create opportunities for women, which we did, to do writers... I don't regret any of the writers that we worked with, because the box office success or them being done again isn't the thing that just said it was right to do it. They were important for that moment in time.

But what is definitely true is, if you were a company [like us] that says it's going to do new writing, you have problems. It's no accident that we did some wonderful translations done by Gillian Hanna, [of plays] by other women writers in other countries. Because sometimes, yes, you wanted to do plays that were reflecting what was happening in other countries. But also, to have a text that was already established was so much easier.

That said, it still had the imagination. We did *Shakespeare's Sister* (1980/82), that came... I remember going to Paris with Gillian Hanna, Theatre de l'Aquarium - she speaks French so beautifully. And you came back with a script, but that had room for the imagination. Hilary Westlake did a wonderful production. I found it difficult...{because of the kinds of things she had to do}, But I recognised you were creating something that still answered what we were trying to do and what a writer was trying to do.

So Gillie, you should talk a bit. But that relationship with life, with work, with the Arts Council, it's all tightly, tightly woven in with things that maybe we didn't talk about enough. I think the Advisory Board {appointed in the late 1980s to advise the collective management} encouraged us to bring in people to talk about other things. But you can't just put it on like icing.

JH: Well, when you start, and the collective was right at the start, you can get through so many years, but then the outside world changes and to sustain it you need to make shifts.