



## Impact and Legacy

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 1993-2018 section  
of the History pages on this website, titled **Re-Telling the Story**.

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.

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JH: We're probably moving towards the end. Do you want to... talk more about ... how, overall, the Monstrous Regiment work sat with audiences?

KD: I'd like to say something here because I first encountered Monstrous Regiment.... [when] I saw *Teendreams* (1979) at the ICA...

I was at City University doing the arts admin course, came to see the show, and remember thinking well, here I am. I've come to work in theatre and look, there's theatre like this that I could work in. And that, *now*, realising how fortunate that encounter was, both in terms of me entering theatre around then and those possibilities becoming more open for women generally. But also just having seen the company, and that was the first show as my introduction to what theatre with women at the heart of it could be about.

JH: And I think for me a bit earlier, because Bryony [Lavery], Jerry [Gerard Bell] and I had just started *Les Oeufs Malades*, and we were at the Drill Hall. And you were coming with *Scum* to the Drill Hall. And I was a bit green in those days. I remember Jerry and me coming and sitting in the audience and me thinking there are a lot of women in this audience. Because I knew nothing about...

But I remember the effect of *Scum*. I mean I just think everybody who saw *Scum*, it was just the most dynamic, exciting piece of work - predating *Nicholas Nickleby* and that kind of ensemble playing which I think really influenced so many people and that was the leading dynamic behind all of your work.

GH: One of the documents in the famous Jackdaw [series]... Jackdaws were folders covering specific historical events, and you opened the folder and it was full of reproductions of important documents, pictures, to do with that event. Anyway, one of the documents in the folder was a verbatim account of a women's club meeting in Paris during the commune, and the women saying we want this, we want that, we want crèches, we want education...all the things.

And so - it was one of the things that we put in, not Chris [Bond] - so at a certain point [in the show], at the height of the commune, the women turned over the wash things, and stood up on them and just verbatim did this club meeting. And I always remember meeting someone, obviously I don't know who it was, after a show and them saying oh god, it was wonderful, *except* for that awful bit where they got up on the washtubs.

[90.00] And I went well, what was so awful about that? Oh that, you can't put modern stuff in the middle of a play about the commune. It just doesn't sit right. Your concerns... And I said...it was a him. And I said to him, that scene was an absolute word for word verbatim account of a meeting that took place in Paris in 1871. And he went, really? I went, that's how long we've been asking for these things.

MM: But there was little... I mean it does remind me that *Scum* I think satisfied a lot of theatrical needs within our audience... It was great, it was moving. But also politically there were a lot of people for whom the Paris commune stood for such a lot. And I remember we did it in Hull and there were some Russian ships in, and they came to see it.

GH: I don't remember that.

MM: And I got sent, from the captain, this little badge with Lenin, and another little one with a hammer and sickle, because they decided that my playing of the bourgeoisie {playing the part of Madame Masson} was the cherry on the cake.

GH: Oh, I'm getting shivers thinking about it.

MM: And it was like you were saying...because you don't know who you're playing to, and of course it was lonely being the sole bourgeois... I thought it was hysterical. I thought, ha-ha, if only they could see me in Scotland now, yes, this representative of the bourgeoisie! And sometimes it was a bit lonely {playing that part} because I really wanted to be on the barricades. So I loved the fact that these Russians had decided that my playing of the bourgeoisie was the cherry on the cake.

But I think your account, Katrina, of seeing it and thinking oh, this is great... There were many occasions later, even, when somebody would come and say they'd seen an early show and it had made them decide to do a certain thing.

And when we did *Love Story of the Century* (1990) sometimes the subject matter... One, it was rather beautiful to look at, but two, you were constantly having people come up after the show, that thing of alcohol having touched so many people's lives, either personally or living with somebody, that you would... And most often people do always like to tell you what they don't like, but what's lovely is that people also enjoyed telling you what they did like.

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GH: I remember..... We had two nights booked at an arts centre, somewhere in East Anglia, I think it was Ipswich. And of course that's the other thing with touring, is because you're constantly on tour, and if you had the money you would employ somebody specifically to go ahead of you by three weeks and make sure that the venue was [geared up]...

But of course we went to this place, the posters were still under the desk, blah-blah-blah. Anyway, there was something like five, six people booked the first night. The second night was quite good. And we went, oh Jesus. And then we said, listen. So we said to them look, this is our offer. We'll go out to the offy and get a few bottles of wine, we'll sing you all the songs and we'll give you free tickets for tomorrow night. And they went oh, that sounds like a good offer. And that's what we did. And it was really jolly, wasn't it?

MM: It was much much better!

GH: It was really jolly. But you see, those are the sorts of things... You'd never get away with that now, would you? I don't think so.

MM: Most venues, if you're booked to do a night now, you'll have to do it, even...

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MM: I had some wonderful audience reaction to... Madame Moustache, my card-sharp mass murderer [in *Calamity* (1983)]. [A man I knew]... said to me afterwards, he said I've never wanted to be a woman before, but that part made me want to be a woman. And I thought, so often for women, you're thinking that's a part I want to play. I want to be doing that. I don't want to be at the sink. I don't want to be saying darling, where are you going? Those boring conversations.

GH: Kevin Kline I always wanted to be.

MM: Yeah. But it's easy to take for granted sometimes that actually there was a range of parts written {for companies such as Monstrous Regiment} that nobody had written before... It just hadn't happened. And there are more women writing now. And it's no longer seen as extraordinary.

That doesn't mean I think that we can sit back, because things can change the other way very easily. But I think what is true is that if there's any legacy of anything of what we all around this table have done, it is that by the very things we did there are now more women doing them. And not thinking it's extraordinary, nor thinking of the fact that not so long ago... standing on the shoulders of those who went before. But there are lots of young women who just take for granted that things are as they [now] are.

KD: The fact that I'd seen Monstrous Regiment, did the placement from the City University course, and then met Debbie Shewell, who went on to direct two shows with Monstrous Regiment... Debbie and I met in an evening stage management class. And when it was in the run up to Women Live, in 1982, when women took over all the art spaces or as many as they could in the UK, Debbie and I went, well, we could start a company, so we've got a show ready for that. And we only thought that because we'd seen that other women had done that, and that that was possible.

GH: Absolutely, yeah.

KD: And we were just one example of what so many other women saw and thought, oh, yeah, I'll have a crack at that, and I want my theatre to say *this* about women. And it's...well, you know, Jess, with *Unfinished Histories*, there's just been... There was a fantastically rich time when lots of women said different things about their experience of being a woman through theatre.

GH: And going back to what Mary said earlier, I don't know when 'I can have a crack at that', turned into 'this is what I do'. I don't know when that happened.

KD: I don't know. It's not a thing you actually realise until you reflect, and even then there's not a single moment for most people, it's just on a continuum.

GH: I mean I think one of the things that did it for me was after the disaster of the first version of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1979)... I can't remember, I know Lily Susan left and I know Linda [Broughton] did and I can't remember who else did. But I can be very stubborn, and I can remember that they both were absolutely convinced that we should stop now, that that was the end of it.

[100.00] And I can remember thinking, why? Why? Just because you don't want to do it. And that made me very, very stubborn about getting the next version [of that show] on. Probably not a good trait, stubbornness. And maybe that's when 'I can do this' turned into 'this is what I do'. Maybe, I don't really remember.

MM: And I can also remember thinking right, we're going to have to... [make sure that] part of every day is about acting. I invented flexi-week for us, so that... everybody would have either a Monday or a Friday [off], and we'd go to different bits of the country to see things and make new contacts, be looking... Rather than get so enclosed in the [company] meetings about which [political] rallies we should be supporting. We had to feed ourselves as *theatrical* beings.

And I think that's the danger if it becomes unbalanced, that you can lose sight... of the theatrical beat in your heart that keeps you going. And you *do* get a bit tired. But... always, I think throughout, we did try to bring in other influences.

JH: And I think that is something that was very, well, I'm going to say unique to Monstrous Regiment, the range of different artistic... different plays, thinking about... I know people played a lot with form. But really different ways that plays could be produced, the foreign plays and the range of writers. And that you as artists were very central to it, and so that you could grow as artistic beings as well. Saying not, this is the way we act and do shows, but looking around and seeing what you could bring in.

GH: Yes, absolutely. And I think exactly, that came from the fact that certainly Mary and me, and Linda [Broughton] until she went off, and I think Chrissie [Bowler] to a lesser extent, had come from a background of 'proper acting'.

MM: Yeah.

GH: And so proper acting was incredibly important to us. Doing a performance, a proper performance where you approach a part, you do research if you need to, you rehearse, blah-blah. I think that's one of the things that fuelled that because we certainly felt a need... Look, this is my job, I need to learn to do it better. I want to do it in a way that doesn't involve wearing a PVC skirt and stuff like that.

{She refers back to Mary's earlier story, in 'How It Began'}. 'People biting my nipples', I've never heard that story before. I'll have to hear about that. Anyway, who was it? I'll go and duff them up for you, Mary.

MM: There were several well-known people in that boat, I have to say.

GH: The cheek.

MM: Well-known. Some are even decorated.

GH: And I suspect that made a difference with some of the other companies who are absolutely - I mean there's no criticism involved here at all - were doing things for a *political* point of view. And when they felt they had accomplished as much as they could, they moved onto something different. But that wasn't the same for us, because the accomplishment was - I mean, if you like, selfish - the accomplishment was about being *actors*.

JH: So maybe that's a note to finish on.

MM: I think that's probably a good note.

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MM: Actually, a nice look back.

GH: It was lovely.

MM: And not a depressing look back, because I don't like to be caught in the past, but it's good to remember.