



Gentlemen Prefer Blondes I and II

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 1978-1980 section
of the History pages on this website, titled **A Challenging Time**.

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.

{They have been talking about relations with directors, and now focus on Angela Hopkins and the second version of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*}

GH: I mean we worked with a wonderful director called Angela Hopkins who, god bless her soul, was killed in a car crash. Now, I think had Angela not died, I think that would've set us on a whole interesting way of working. Because *she* was very sure of herself. She was a wonderful director, she was very sure of herself. She had no emotional hiccups with us at all. She liked us, we liked her.

But she was very clear about 'you're the collective, I'm the director of *this show*. These are my decisions, these are your decisions, and I'm not going to take them for you. So if there's a decision which has to be your decision go away, have a meeting and take it, because it's not up to me'. And she was so clear about all of that, it was wonderful. And we were discussing with her the possibility of her, well, I'm not quite sure what it would've been but...

JH: Would she have directed *Time Gentlemen [Please]* (1978)?

GH: No, she directed...

MM: *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* Mark Two (1979-80)...

GH: *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* Mark Two.

MM: *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* Mark **One** (1979) was the collective response to not having a play. We had a tour, a smallish tour booked for a Caryl Churchill, and Caryl hadn't managed to write the play, which we were just floored by. [FN] And the collective, Sue [Todd], had come up with the idea of doing a version of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* {the novel by Anita Loos}. I have to say at this point, I voted against it. But it didn't matter, the collective said yes.

And that was partly my fear, because I thought once... We normally gave longer rehearsal periods. But because Caryl, with *Vinegar Tom*, it was there {as a fully formed script}, we thought it would be the same with this one. And so we'd allocated, in order to maximise our income, a short rehearsal period of three and a half weeks, standard. And so we had a very short time from the one show finishing to then start collecting the material to do this [first] version [of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*].

I'm sure Lily Sue [Todd] would agree with this. She wrote quite long bits of it which were wonderful analysis of economic situations in Germany and what sort of... We all wrote some. My scenes were short, filled with witty little one-liners. So there was a... And Stephen Ley did some of it. So you had a kind of collective writing.

JH: A smorgasbord.

MM: As I said, I did 17 characters plus the Statue of Liberty on roller-skates.

GH: On roller-skates.

MM: You've forgotten that, I know that. 'Life Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness'! My roller-skates weren't terribly good. But it was a challenge. It was a challenge that collectively didn't quite come off. It was hard work as well.

[65.00] And Annie [Mitchell] said, the last night we did it... {Mitchell reportedly said 'Darlings, the curtain call, how brave' *Monstrous Regiment* 1991, p xlvi} This time it was at the Communist University [of London], and people did leave. They left because they were deeply disappointed in us. It was like your mother coming to see your show and going 'oh Mary, why did you do that? I'm deeply ashamed of ya, hen'.

And it was like, you're looking over another actor's shoulder thinking... And I was saying to Gillian, {whispers} 'the audience is leaving'. And it was. You didn't feel as you might in a play that you had nothing to do with it. I think that's the thing about a collective process. When people don't like the show it pains you. And I'm sure it must...

GH: Oh...

MM: ...have pained Lily Sue, as she is now {who directed the show} as well. But [it felt like] she kind of abandoned us the next day and pretended she didn't know us. And I realise retrospectively... I mean we felt, why isn't she acknowledging we are here? Because she was in the auditorium, they were doing a workshop, and we had to strike the set - it was so embarrassing.

But you do, when you're involved in a collective process... You're an individual and a professional, so of course it hurts. But actually you've invested more in it than just if you've been asked to do *As You Like It*, up in Newcastle - you didn't write it, you didn't sit with the writer for months going blah-blah-blah.

So Mark Two {of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*} came after that. And Bryony [Lavery] wrote it.

GH: Rescued us.

MM: And we toured it all over. We opened with three weeks of one-night stands, I remember it well. And we had lovely treats within that. We did the Citizens [Theatre] in Glasgow. We broke box office records, at the Citizens, and went back there [later] with *Calamity* (1983-4), another Bryony show.

But Angela [Hopkins] forged a relationship with us, and I think because we were a bit damaged from what happened before, because it had been... And it {the previous version, Mark One} did cause bits of friction between the director and other people who had been involved in it who at that point were thinking we should probably stop {and some left}. And we {other members of the company, including GH and MM} decided we were going on.

And so Angela was... It was great, because there was no muddiness. It's a bit like being in a relationship where someone says... I realised belatedly it's much better to say to somebody, 'I disagree with you totally, but we're going to have to talk about it, and these are the areas we have to talk about and we'll agree to...'. We tended *collectively* to sometimes, I think, decide we mustn't overpower people with our power.

GH: Yes, I think that's right.

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