Writing Our Own History

Feminist Theatricals

Monstrous Regiment is one of our most successful theatre groups. Gillian Hanna talks to Lynn Alderson about how women developed political theatre.

LA: *How did you get involved in acting?*
GH: I got involved by accident. I'd always been fascinated by it, but never thought it was something I could make a living at. When I was at college, Trinity College, Dublin, it had a very strong drama group. I initially got involved because my friend Paula said, 'I want to go down and audition, but I'm too scared, will you come with me?', so I did and ended up getting a part in a play. After that, I got terribly involved, and did that for four years.

I drifted into acting professionally in Dublin, just because it's such a small place – if you got known, people started asking you to do things, so most of my last year at college was really spent working. I wasn't sure what I wanted to do next. I'd wanted to be a simultaneous translator and work at the United Nations, but I couldn't face another four years training. It's all Michael Bogdanov's fault really. I'd worked with him a couple of times and he said, 'Well, of course you're going to go into the theatre', and got me an interview at the Everyman in Liverpool. I got the job – that was 1968.

LA: *Was the Everyman doing political theatre?*
GH: Yes. I was there at a very interesting time. To be doing things like Marguerite Duras at a small 'youth' theatre well, it seemed like the cutting edge. We did wonderful productions of things like Agamemnon influenced by the Vietnam war – it was really exciting. Later we did start to do more overtly political work.
LA: *Was this part of a political awakening for you personally?*
GH: I had been such a good little girl, a nice, middle class conservative! I can remember sitting and watching the results of the 1964 election when Harold Wilson got in and thinking, this is dreadful, what's going to happen! I'm so ashamed of it! Isn't that awful.

So, going to Liverpool was an absolute cataclysm; it changed my life on all fronts. You'd have to have no senses at all to not notice what was going on. Everyone was affected, infected by the political ideas coming from France and elsewhere – a huge change, both intellectually and emotionally.
LA: *There seemed to be a particularly creative impact of two things there, politics and theatre.*
GH: Yes, all sorts of things going on. In 1971/72 I went over to Newcastle and met Sue Todd. She was Associate Director at the rep. She had been involved in the London Women's Street Theatre Group and she brought all that with her. I had done some street theatre in Liverpool and then we started doing it in Newcastle – around issues like changes in the Rent Act. No rep today would produce and sanction that kind of activity.
LA: *Also you can't imagine street theatre in that way now – it's all contained, all in Covent Garden.*

GH: I remember seeing the People Show doing one of the most wonderful things I think I've ever seen. It was part of the Clyde Fair, which was a precursor to Mayfest. There was a sidestreet off Sauchiehall Street, on a very steep hill. I watched the People Show, they had complete climbing gear – crampons, ropes, the lot – climbing up this street. It was hysterical. That going on, plus people like us running around in the streets doing things with top hats and big cigars about wicked capitalism.

When I eventually joined a group called Belt and Braces, we did a lot of street stuff – it was political, but by that point more anarchistic – known as arseholing because you just went out and made an idiot of yourself, escaping from mailbags, things like that. I was still at this point totally committed to 'alternative' theatre; it was just so exciting, it was happening everywhere. Wherever you went you could find some extraordinary group of people who were doing stuff that you wanted to do – all kinds of issues. Everything was up for grabs, really, except women.
LA: *So how did Monstrous Regiment come about?*
GH: I got hold of a copy of *The Female Eunuch* – me and five million other women – stayed in bed, for days reading it, thought, Ah, the scales have now fallen from my eyes, I can see what it's all about now. Then Shulamith Firestone; it was like finding the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, finding something that suddenly made sense of my life, everything I had felt was wrong with my life and the world. You can't underestimate that sense of excitement. We really thought we were going to change the world. We knew it wasn't going to be easy, there'd be lots of struggles and even, in some of our more romantic moments, that some of us might die on the barricades, but we were certain that was what we were going to do.

I was still very involved in the boys' stuff at that point, and they, of course, weren't interested in taking on these issues. I didn't at first know how to bring together the two sides of the politics, the socialist side of my beliefs with the feminist side. It wasn't possible for me to be in other political groups, or women's groups, we were always on tour, it was hard to talk to people not in the troupe.

Anyway we were recasting a play to take on tour; it had one decent part in it for a woman which I was going to do, and one other part, literally a walk on, awful. The play was about coalmining, lots of parts for blokes. So we saw all these blokes, they were fine and then all these women came in to be auditioned and they were extraordinary. When they weren't working they were writing or doing one-woman shows and I thought, this is wrong, all these wonderful women who never have any work. So I decided to do something about it. Out of the women who came to audition I contacted nine or ten to discuss the possibility of a women's company, possibly attached to Belt and Braces. We met for the first time in August 1975, on the day there

was a huge flood – people were out in Hampstead in boats – and every single woman got to that meeting, even if she was three hours late and had to be put in a hot bath, every single one came, and we thought great, this is a good omen.

When it became clear that Belt and Braces had no interest whatsoever in doing this kind of work, we decided to go it alone. Chris Bowler, Mary McCusker and myself made ourselves unemployed for three months in order to set up a tour. Some dropped by the wayside; various others came in, like Sue Todd. We asked her if she'd like to direct the first show and she ended up joining the company. The difference about us was, we were not a group of politically-motivated women who wanted to use theatre as a means of expressing our politics, we were a group of theatricals, most of whom had histories in straight theatre, who wanted to use that. We used to say to each other that we didn't start out as a feminist company but as a bunch of stroppy women and within five minutes we became feminist.

LA: *You had men in the company. Was that a conscious decision?*

GH: At the beginning we did. Yes, it was conscious, we had a lot of discussions about it. There were no separatists or radical feminists in the group, as it happened, but several socialist feminists and it was predominantly heterosexual. Those things influenced the direction that the group went in, in the beginning.

LA: Scum *was your first production, how did that come together?*

GH: It's difficult to describe. The input of the men was quite important at the beginning, but as soon as we realised what we were, the strength of the women, it got less. The first playwright we asked to write for us was a man, which is crazy when you look back on it. We used to meet intermittently in those days, we were all doing different things, and we drew up a list of things we wanted to do plays about – not issues, like abortion for example, but topics like witchcraft. *Scum* was a play with music (we could afford music in those days) about the women of the Paris Commune. It was set in a laundry. It was the story of how the women in the laundry got rid of the boss and ran the laundry themselves and how the act of doing that was in itself consciousness-raising. It showed how they learned to do things.

The reason we wanted to do a play about the Paris Commune is because we came across a volume of documents from the Commune which included these extraordinary proclamations by the women's clubs, demands of equal pay, nursery care, and we said, this is one hundred years later and we still haven't got any of this. What the women of the Commune were wanting seemed to marry very closely with what we as women were wanting at that point: equality of opportunity, but equality of excitement also. It wasn't just about nurseries, schools and jobs, but also getting up on top of a laundry box and making a speech.

LA: *You were using this to say things about women in the '70s.*

GH: There was a scene in the play where three of the laundresses simply turned over their washtubs, got on them and shouted at the audience as if they were in the club, and as far as I remember that scene was taken verbatim from the documents of 1871. Later, several people said to me things like, 'It was terrific, except for that scene where you got all the modern stuff out, I thought that really didn't sit well' and I said 'What modern stuff?' And they said, 'You know, all that stuff about nurseries and schools etc., you should stick to the history.' It was exactly what got us going initially – that was what had given us the spur.

It was full of wonderful characters like the one I played, Mole. She was the spirit of revolution and she lived in a laundry basket. She did stuff with puppets and things and there was a romantic love interest, so it wasn't just about a list of demands. There was a tension about class in there also, middle class women and working class women coming together under adversity – that was an important theme. What we were trying to say was that women had more in common with each other despite their class.

LA: *What reaction did you get to* Scum?

GH: People loved it, absolutely loved it. We took it all over the country. But it was never acknowledged by the straight drama critics. I have a memory of a review in the *Guardian* saying something like 'Well, when this fad for feminism passes, things like this will be seen as the load of rubbish they are.'

Mark Barlier

Gillian Hanna in 'Shakespeare's Sister' by Monstrous Regiment.

Because feminism was very fashionable at the time, there was a strand that was very interested in what we were doing, and we wanted to talk to reporters about the serious politics of what we were doing, but the attitudes were more, 'What are the girls up to now?'

LA: *How did you get on? There must have been a lot of pressure on you all?*

GH: My memory is that in the first year the excitement of it carried us through the problems and difficulties. After that we started to have to face up to the real problems. There were deep disagreements which we didn't want to recognise at first. A group of people who had gotten together in a moment of fury, it's only when the fury passes that you realise you may not have as much in common with each other as you had originally thought.

The fury was about everything. That's the other thing about the theatre: on one level it's a conscious, intellectual process to try to present or show some discussions, point of conflict, some explosion; but the other part of it is a deeply emotional experience, being in and doing and making theatre, and it's difficult to know how to bring that all together.

LA: *The impact of the personal and the political?*

GH: Yes, it's something I've had to think about recently, whether it was a mistake to try to bring together your working life and your politics. There is another way that people do it – their working life is here and their political involvement somewhere else. But I don't think that was possible with the women's movement, because there was no movement as such, you couldn't go to someone's house in Notting Hill Gate and join up – it's about your everyday life and the whole of your life.

For a lot of women, I think the play had the same effect as *The Female Eunuch*. It's not that it told them something they didn't know; it got them at the right moment when they were asking questions in their heads – it helped to open a door.

LA: *It must have been very rewarding.*

GH: I don't think we ever had time for that, it was such hard work. As soon as you got one show on the road, you were onto the next one.

Vinegar Tom – that was a completely different process from the first one. We had met Caryl Churchill on a Grunwick march – it turned out to be one of those wonderful coincidences. She had been writing a play for Joint Stock about Diggers and Ranters. In the course of doing the research, she had come across all this witchcraft material and got absolutely fascinated. She wanted to write a play about witchcraft and then we came along and said we were looking for someone to write us a play on witchcraft . . .

LA: *Why witchcraft at this particular point? There was a lot of interest in general in the women's movement, about witchcraft as persecution of women, violence against women in*

Willoughby Gullachsen Pictures

Gillian Hanna in 'Origin of the Species' by Bryony Lavery, 1984.

a historical perspective, witchcraft as women's resistance, was it that kind of interest?
GH: We had a lot of discussion about it coinciding with men taking over activities and work which had been women's prerogatives – professionalisation. Also, *Witches, Midwives and Nurses* was very important – we all read that. Also about fear, what people are frightened of – I suppose it's the same question you ask over and over again, why do they hate us, what are they so terrified of?
LA: *What did the play say about that, that there's no basis for their fear?*
GH: Well, there is and there isn't! The last song where we all lined up in front of the audience says, 'Look what are you frightened of, we're here – if you want to be frightened of us, here we are – we're all witches'.
LA: *It's a much less straightforward play than* Scum, *more complicated ideas. What kind of reaction did you get?*
GH: It was mixed. With both plays, a lot of men didn't like them and have never liked anything that we've ever done, simply because they think it's not worth bothering with. We used to have a little yardstick – still do – how much of a willie-shriveller is this one?

I have this sense that we were very taken aback by the hostility we met, we were so excited by what we were doing we didn't expect it.
LA: *And the truth seemed so self-evident?*
GH: Absolutely. But, a lot of the reviews were very hostile – and lots of other things made us very angry. Like you'd go to a theatre where you were going to perform and the technicians in the theatre would approach one of the men for instructions and that would drive us insane. The men were pretty good on the whole and would say 'You'll have to ask her'. But we did make some terrible mistakes with men in the group who were hostile to what we were doing but also attracted to it at the same time. Of course, ironically, some of the men who were originally in Monstrous are now doing very well in mainstream theatre.
LA: *You were seeing yourselves as a feminist group by this time?*
GH: Well, I don't know. Partly we were resisting all labels, which is stupid really. Now I embrace that label with glee, great glee.
LA: *Has the development of Monstrous reflected the changes that you've all gone through?*
GH: As a company, we've been decimated. At the beginning we had enough money (from the Arts Council) to employ 11 people, 52 weeks in the year. We now employ one person, an administrator, and everybody else comes and goes. We all know that we've got to grow up and there's no such thing as a free lunch, as those nice Tories keep telling us, but the National Theatre and the RSC find it hard enough to get sponsorship. Small-scale theatre has nothing to offer sponsors at all because there's nothing in the way of prestige, especially a group like us that's running around shouting the odds about women, still, after all these years. It would be ludicrous to think that we were ever going to get enough sponsorship to replace the dwindling Arts Council funds.

It means that you have less and less room to talk about the things you really want to put into your work and more and more time is spent just getting from day to day – especially since most of us do other work as well.
LA: *Did you always see yourself as a professional company?*
GH: Yes, it was terribly important to be professional and I think that was always very clear that we were one of that band of young theatricals, which was a recognised movement at that time. Of course that's all gone out of the window now, as companies get cut one after another.
LA: *What is Monstrous doing now?*
GH: We're trying to commission more young women writers, but at the same time we've been trying to 'up the profile' of it, because you quite often come across people who say 'Oh gosh, I didn't know you were still going'. You can no longer rest on any laurels, so, for example, two years ago we did an American play that had never been done in England called *My Sister In This House* – based on the same true events on which Genet based *The Maids*. It was terribly well received; we did it in Leicester and then brought it to Hampstead, and then nobody mentioned Monstrous Regiment. All the publicity and interest was about Hampstead Theatre Club, so we'd gone to all this effort to show people that we were still around and it was largely ignored.

In the early days there wasn't really a problem of who you were performing for because the women's movement was so lively and on the edge of everything – you per-

formed for that movement. Now that seems to have receded. Fifteen years on feminism is in quite a different place – there doesn't seem to be a lot of energy being generated and I think we reflect that. In a sense that was all we ever did, reflect what was going on in that wider movement. We're still here, clinging on by our fingernails, but where is the audience? Tell me why you haven't seen us for ages.

LA: *Well, I think there's a lack of information – I would have known about everything that was going on some time ago, newsletters, just going out and about and talking to other women. My own life has got much more introverted. My work is also involving in a political sense and so my social life is more simply social and less politicallsocial. I don't think I'm alone in that.*

GH: No, I don't think you are. To that extent, I think we've lost our audience. I'm not sure that anything we can do will bring that particular audience back to us because that's part of a whole social change and we are only part of that change, not the cause of it. Also we have suffered terribly from the perception that feminism is no longer fashionable. You'll quite often ring up a place to get a booking and they'll say, 'Oh well, we did women last year'. It's almost like we've been completely re-marginalised again, not just as a company, but as women. There is a general – although I think completely mistaken – belief that women are now in the mainstream, that we don't have to bother about it any more.

It 's now impossible to do a tour that doesn't involve 80 per cent one night stands. That is not the way to do good work. It's very much a question of dodging and weaving, hanging on by your teeth until you can find a way of turning events to your own advantage. We have just got stubborn and are saying we're not going to go away; we will hang on in there until it changes sufficiently for us to launch off again.

LA: *Who is in the group now?*

GH: Basically the group consists of the three women who initially made themselves unemployed to start it, Chris, Mary and myself, and our administrator Rose Sharp. We also have a pool of women we draw on. We have an advisory committee who meet four times a year and give us input, talk about what's wrong or right with the company, what they'd like to see us doing – it's an interesting forum.

And there are a lot of young women writers now, although we get caught in this thing that they don't necessarily want to write for us because we've been so marginalised. In terms of a writer's aspirations, they want to be seen in the world, so given the choice of the Royal Court or us, they will choose to write for what they perceive to be a wider audience that they can reach by writing for a more mainstream theatre.

LA: *So what do you feel about 'women's theatre'? There wasn't such a thing, now there is, but it's still not part of the mainstream.*

GH: I veer between being quite optimistic about things turning round and feeling we're a dead duck. It's exacerbated by all these people wanting to study us – it does make you feel like you're dead. Why do all these people want to write theses about us and study us on courses?

LA: *Is it not partly because that's one of the few areas of feminist activity left, academic work? There are no CR groups but there are women's studies courses and that's where a lot of young women first come into contact with feminist ideas. It's important that some things do survive so that when a new generation comes along that wants to know — they'll do something different from whatever it was we did, but hopefully they'll be able to make some of the links. One of the awful things is how we keep on having to do it all again, like you discovered with the Paris Commune.*

So, why are you still gleeful about feminism?

GH: First of all there is nothing that drives me crazier than hearing someone say, 'Of course, I'm not a feminist, but . . .' and I loathe 'post-feminism' – I think it's entirely meaningless. We haven't achieved anything of what we wanted: a few little things here and there, but the battle is still to be won, to be restarted. I'm not abandoning something that has been, I suppose, the most important thing in my life. The political atmosphere in which we work is like a trampoline, when it starts to improve we'll start to bounce higher and higher again. □

The Female Eunuch, Germaine Greer, Paladin, 1971.
Witches, Midwives and Nurses: a history of women healers, Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English, Writers and Readers, 1977.

Trouble & Strife

The radical feminist magazine

Thinking feminist, thinking black
Back to the future of women's liberation
Putting your money where your mouth is
Child sexual abuse: resisting the professional take-over
Violence between women
Feminist theatricals

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Trouble and Strife is cockney rhyming slang for wife. We chose this name because it acknowledges the reality of conflict in relations between women and men. As radical feminists, our politics come directly from this tension between men's power and women's resistance.

Trouble & Strife is produced collectively by Lynn Alderson, Margot Farnham, Cath Jackson, Susanne Kappeler, Liz Kelly, Sophie Laws, Lyn May and Sara Scott, with help from Hilary Allen, Sue Allen, Alison Dickens, Judy Stevens, Catherine Tidnam, Harriet Wistrich. With many thanks to the Women's Health and Reproductive Rights Centre for the use of their space and resources.

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