



1997 Interview with Gillian Hanna

This interview was conducted by Lizbeth Goodman in 1990, with additional material from 1995.

It was published in a collection of interviews by Lizbeth Goodman with Jane de Gay, *Feminist Stages: Interviews with Women in British Theatre* (Harwood Academic Publishers 1997, 32-39).

In it, Gillian is invited to reflect on what she had said about Monstrous Regiment and feminist theatre in a much earlier interview in 1978.

GILLIAN HANNA

Gillian Hanna is an actress and translator. She has worked with the 7:84 company and with Belt and Braces from 1971 to 1975 before co-founding the Monstrous Regiment theatre group in 1975. Hanna worked exclusively within the Regiment from 1975 to 1981/2, and was one of the three original members who actively participated in Regiment management, production and performance until the ACGB (Arts Council of Great Britain) withdrew funding in 1993 and the company was forced to stop working. Since 1982 she has also worked extensively outside the group, winning several awards (1989 Time Out/01 for London, 1990 Manchester Evening News Best Actress for Juno and the Paycock at the Contact Theatre, 1991 Martini/TMA Regional Theatre Awards, Best Actress for Beatrice in Arthur Miller's A View from the Bridge at the Royal Exchange, Manchester). Her translations of Dario Fo's Elizabeth: Almost By Chance a Woman and Franca Rame's collection of one-woman plays A Woman Alone are published by Methuen. Her history of the company, Monstrous Regiment, A Collective Celebration is published by Nick Hern Books. In 1994 she toured in the Out of Joint/Royal Court/West End production of Sue Townsend's The Queen and I.

You gave an interview to Peter Hulton entitled 'Feminism and Theatre' which was published in 1978¹ and is still widely quoted, sometimes to your consternation, since the material is often quoted without reference to the fact that the information is now 16 years out of date. This is your chance to set the record straight on some of the things you said in that 1978 interview, and our chance to hear what you have to say, both in response to that interview and more directly on the subject of feminist theatre today.

That interview is often quoted, and I am concerned because it was so long ago. What I think about things has changed quite a lot, and it's odd to see myself quoted as believing something I no longer believe, or at least that I wouldn't any longer say without qualification. In fact, I can't believe that people are still reading that interview!

Of all the material written on feminist theatre, the 1978 interview is one of only a very few items which have been entered into computer files and cross-referenced in the major libraries; thus, the interview is visible, accessible, in a way in which many other materials on feminist theatre are not. Though this does not in any way detract from the considerable impact of the information the interview provided, it does seem to me to be typical of the arbitrary nature of much of the selection and distribution of

¹ Published in *Theatre Papers* (Dartington College, Second Series, no. 8).

materials made available for study in any given discipline, and especially in a contemporary and 'alternative' discipline like feminist theatre.

The lead-up to the 1978 interview wasn't quite as arbitrary as it sounds. At the time, Monstrous was one of the most visible of the women's groups and was doing some of the most exciting work. So we were the group to whom any interviewer would naturally have gravitated, and my knowing Peter made me the natural individual to single out for the interview. But I do agree that some of the most valuable material written to date is not generally available. (The Monstrous Regiment book, for example, is almost impossible to find though it is still in print²). I think we have a responsibility to make the ideas and events of women's theatre as visible as possible. Otherwise, it will all sink out of sight and be 'hidden from history' again.

Were there men involved in the Regiment in 1978?

Yes. There always had been, right from the beginning. It was only in 1980/81 that we became an all-women's group, and then it wasn't because we sat down and decided we were separatists; it wasn't that simple. The shift from a mixed to an all-women's group was more of a process than a decision; it was something that evolved.

And yet, men included, the Regiment was clearly thought of as a feminist group. Does that imply a consensus that the men involved were, in their own way, feminist? Or did the Regiment's relatively positive representations of women earn it the feminist label?

It's hard to say, looking back. What people tend to forget is that, in the late 1970s, feminism was the most exciting thing going, especially for people interested in politics.

I want to be very careful about discussing the 'men and feminism' issue in relation to our theatre. In the early years, there were a lot of men who claimed to be feminist, who wanted to be a part of the movement because (a) it looked exciting; and (b) it looked progressive. Some self-consciously left-wing, progressive men wanted to be part of that, but it didn't mean that in their heart of hearts they really believed in what feminism stood for or that their commitment would withstand the pressure when they were called on to abandon some of their patriarchal privileges.

As I recall it, there was no question of *not* having men in the group at the beginning. It wasn't that as women we felt unable to operate without the sanction of male presence. It was that the kind of plays we wanted to do —

² *Monstrous Regiment: Four Plays and a Collective Celebration*, ed. Gillian Hanna (Nick Hern Books, 1991).



2. Gillian Hanna, Jane Cox and Mary McCusker in *Calamity* by Bryony Lavery, produced by Monstrous Regiment (1983); photographer: Diane Gelon.

the subjects we wanted to tackle at that time — required having men on the stage. We never sat down and decided not to work with men, but after the men involved left for various reasons, we could see no reason to take on any others. The projects we were planning at that time were shows with no male characters in them. And in time we found that it was easier. In the end we just had to organize ourselves autonomously and to work in women-only situations.

When you talk about us as a feminist group, you have to make a distinction between the organizational structure of the company and the work that appeared on the stage. The Regiment was established on the basis of feminist principles. It was crucial that it was run by women, that its commitment was to women... good stage-parts for women (where women could take centre-stage, and not be relegated to the sidelines), jobs for women technicians, writers and directors; child-care provision written into the budgets... It didn't all come together at one moment. We were a disparate group of people who came together and we had to establish our rules through the collective process as we went along.

In the 1978 interview you emphasized the importance of forwarding a feminist consciousness in your work, of trying 'to ally (your perceptions of the world, the need for social change) in some way with those inner needs you have, and those talents you've got...' Does this hold true in the same sense today?

The idea holds true: what has changed is that it is becoming harder and harder for most people to find ways of allying those inner needs and their talents. There are certain places where women's issues are taken seriously these days — mostly in colleges and universities is where 'women's studies' are now an accepted part of the curriculum. But we mustn't assume that we've achieved all our goals. If anything, we have to shout louder than ever, otherwise we will be buried under the backlash.

Considering that Monstrous Regiment has now closed, how much impact did Conservative economic policies have on the group?

Well, it was not so direct that you could blame them for the closure of the company. The fact is that the Arts Council withdrew support: we had had a very rough patch when they made the continued receipt of subsidy dependent on our appointing an Artistic Director. Although we were loathe to do that in some ways, in other ways we recognized that it was a sensible move for us, because, as we were all working more and more outside the group, it became impossible to organize things as well as they should have been organized. So we appointed an Artistic Director, but it was a disaster. All I can say is that values and beliefs were at odds in ways that we had

never envisaged. We started out with a great deal of good will and it just didn't work. The work that year was not wonderful and I think that the Arts Council saw that we were in difficulties, and whereas perhaps 15 years ago, they might have offered help, in 1993 it seemed to us that they were glad of the opportunity to cut us off. I see no reassurance whatsoever that the money that was taken away from us has gone back to funding any other women's projects at all. Maybe they have, but I haven't seen them.

I should add, we haven't completely wound the company up. We are inactive because the Arts Council withdrew our grant, but we are still registered at Companies House — just in case.

Was sponsorship a viable alternative to an Arts Council grant?

The way it is sometimes talked of you'd think public support for the Arts is some kind of charity. It isn't. Fay Weldon says that public subsidy of the Arts is a benchmark of a civilized society. I agree with her. I'm committed to the idea of public subsidy. Conservative government is opposed to it because subsidy is an attempt to take art out of the marketplace (and this government is Hell-bent on turning everything into a commodity). Art is not a commodity. It is a vision of possibilities. It's very difficult to create theatre/art in a society that doesn't believe in anything but acquisition.

Do you believe that the theatre can affect social change?

An artist should be working at the edge of consciousness. As an artist, you should be able to articulate, not necessarily what everyone else is thinking, but what is in the air: you should be on the crest of the wave. It is true that a lot of women over the years have said things to us like 'I saw *Scum*¹ and it changed my life', but I don't believe that we change people's lives with our theatre in the same way that, for instance, political action can.

Theatre, our theatre, was activist and theatrical. In the seventies, we were truly at the edge of consciousness; we were riding on the crest of the post-1968 feminist wave. Women recognized themselves in our work; just as many women will cite books like Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* or Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* as transformative forces in their lives, so our theatre was such a force. It wasn't that the books or plays themselves affected change, but rather that the act of reading or watching them coalesces something within ourselves. A work of art or a book or a play can act as a catalyst. In other words, you can read something or see something which makes things click into place for you, but if those things hadn't been in your consciousness already, the new perspective wouldn't change your life.

¹ 1976, by Claire Luckham and Chris Bond.

But it may lead to recognition, which can support and encourage change?

Or you may realise that while your feet have been walking in one direction, your head has all the while been turned the other way. And so you'll realign yourself, re-define your situation and direction. That's not to say that our work wasn't exciting. At the time, our work was thrilling beyond belief because there was such a strong sense of being part of an important movement. That's the difference between women and men in relation to the 'political theatre' label, and even in relation to the more general notion of revolutionary politics. Women get excited by being part of a larger movement, while men like to think they're acting independently (and I don't mean this in an essentialist way, but rather in a positive, choice-oriented way). Conscious women who were working in certain areas found that their excitement, their sense of purpose, came largely from feeling themselves to be, possibly for the first time in their lives, part of a larger group, a larger movement, as actors in the world, and not as isolated individuals. The sense of connections was terribly important is when Monstrous Regiment started: connections across race, across class, across all kinds of boundaries. That's what the Women's Movement was about.

Are we dealing with the same kinds of connections, or is that what is lacking today?

What is lacking today is one united feminist theatre, or one unified feminist movement, for that matter. We seem to have lost that sense of connection. When the wave of feminism hit us in the seventies we were individual women, mostly isolated with our individual strengths and weaknesses, but in the main lacking in confidence when it came to expressing our ideas. We discovered our confidence and power through collectivity: consciousness-raising groups or rent strike support groups or theatre companies or whatever. And we all gained immeasurable strength from that. And young women have inherited that strength. We created a point on which they can stand and expect their voices to be heard. I see a lot of stropic young women now which is great. But at the same time they have experienced the Thatcherite eighties, the worship of individualism and the demonization of collectivity. Collectivity is so unfashionable, so *uncool*. So it seems to me we've arrived at a situation where you have a lot of tough sassy young women who are wonderfully 'in your face' about their ideas and opinions but who in many ways are as isolated as we were. If only they could experience and understand the power that's unleashed when you act together, what a change they could bring about.

What would you say to the idea that the word 'feminism' — which seems to be a dirty word in England — has cut off the women associated with it in terms of their

careers and opportunities for personal and professional advancement, thereby effecting another split between women so affected and younger women who are fresh to the struggle?

Of course, many of these young women I'm talking about would rather jump out of a moving train than acknowledge that word. Nothing makes me madder than women who say: 'I'm not a feminist, but...' That's exactly what we've been fighting against: it signals a cutting off of your own experience from women's collective history. After all, what is feminism, except a belief that women matter?

The tragedy is that so many women seem to have been alienated from the word, largely because the patriarchs and old fogies (especially in the media) have so debased and besmirched it, held it up to so much derision and ridicule. So a situation has developed in which we find many women back-peddling to avoid any association with the terrible word. It's the same old cycle. We have to reclaim the word just as other generations of women have done.

In the 1978 interview, you were asked to discuss the new 'vistas of material' suddenly opened to women in the theatre. Have those vistas stayed open? Were they really so open (accessible) to begin with?

We were referring to 'vistas' of subjects for women to write about, and those haven't closed; there's still the experience of 51% of the population that rarely gets put on the stage. But if you're talking about access to resources, then one difficulty is that women meet with a lot of resistance when they move into the mainstream... Even ten or fifteen years since 'alternative' theatre came into being, it seems that if you're asking for anything more than the norm, you're in trouble because it's still perceived as a threat to that norm. I think that women working in the mainstream are pressured to try to conform to the norm while maintaining an image of the lone genius woman in the men's club. There are so few women working in the mainstream, I don't know any of them very well, but I would love to talk to them about how they see themselves. It seems from an outside perspective that they feel a need to sidestep feminism because it makes life too difficult. Or, perhaps, they are simply striding forward on what gains have been made in the last fifteen years.

In the 1978 interview, you were asked to describe your vision of 'the possibility of a feminist consciousness pushing towards a new form'.

Yes, I still think the question of form is fascinating. And I think it comes not just from a view of history, but from the different ways the sexes experience their lives... I think I said a lot of this in the original interview, but

I haven't really changed my belief in this. In fact, looking at what many women are writing now, I see it even more clearly. Men's plays tend to be strong on forward moving narrative whereas women's tend towards the episodic, the circular. That's a reflection of how we experience ourselves. I once heard a Canadian playwright describe it also as a reflection of the difference in our sexual experience: men's plays build singlemindedly and inexorably towards one big climax, whereas women's plays have more side-steps and many climaxes along the way. Of course there's a continuing struggle to get this form accepted as legitimate, because as ever, the way men write is accepted as the norm and anything else is a deviation or an aberration.

Lizbeth Goodman

The full version of this interview was published in New Theatre Quarterly, volume VI, No. 21, February 1990 pp. 43-56. The original version was compiled from taped and untaped interviews held from April to August 1989 and edited with collective input from the Monstrous Regiment. It should be noted that the views expressed are those of Gillian Hanna, and do not necessarily reflect those of the Regiment as a whole. Thanks are due Rose Sharp (who was Company Administrator in 1989), and to the Monstrous Regiment Management Collective and Advisory Committee for their valuable criticisms and comments. This interview was updated in January 1995 by Jane de Gay, following a further interview and telephone discussions with Gillian Hanna.