



A Performers Collective

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 1976-1978 section
of the History pages on this website, titled **The Early Shows**.

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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[Part One pp 9-14, edited]

MM: And at that point {1975-76} I must admit the thing that had never filtered through to me as a performer was how many other things I'd have to be involved with apart from the performing.

Because the plus side was hey, I got to talk to writers *before* the play was written, rather than normally in rep there'd be the new play and somebody would say oh, we're thinking of you for this part, and you did the audition. It was a totally different relationship, which I thought gives great strength to me as a performer when I went into the rehearsal room. So that seemed terribly exciting.

What had never entered my head was that I might be doing this one part for such a long time, because we did several tours with *Scum* in conjunction with *Vinegar Tom* (1976-77), and I think there was a loss for me about not doing so many different parts. I mean you're in rep, you're three and a half weeks rehearsal time, and you're in another play. You're doing Fay in *Loot* one week, you're doing Ophelia the next, hey, isn't this great? And any problems associated with it, you left them behind with the last play.

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GH: Can I just add something about the writers?

JH: Yes, certainly Gillie.

GH: Right from the beginning we were very [clear].... that although we were a collective there were certain things we could do and certain things we couldn't do, that required specific skills, and one of them was writing.

And several of us, certainly me, had been involved in devised work, and thought it... I'm not saying it can't be wonderful, but what I had been involved in was rubbish and made me very unhappy. And I have to say, our only foray into devised work proved that with this particular bunch of people it wasn't a good idea {i.e. *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* Version One (1979)}. So we were always very specific about proper writers.

MM: [30.00] Writers, designers, directors...

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... I don't think we'd thought through, would there be problems as you went on? Because you tend to... The first production is the first production. And it so happened that Sue Todd, Lily Sue Todd {her later name}, when she [first] came in she was coming in to *direct* that show {*Scum*}, and then during the course of that [she] stayed and later *performed*.

GH: That was an emergency thing...

MM: Yes, it was an emergency.

GH: ...because somebody dropped out.

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And Lily Sue - Sue as she was then - said well look, I've been directing this for three weeks now, I know it, I'll do it. And that was absolutely great, saved our bacon and she was terrific.

And then what happened was that because she had become a performer, and she liked what we were doing, she then became part of the collective. And in the end... For a long time that was wonderful, and in the end that... Having someone who wasn't a performer... No, let's put it a different... Having someone who was a director as part of a [performers'] collective, certainly I didn't spot it at the time, *mea culpa*, I should've done, I don't know about anybody else, but it created, ultimately, big problems.

JH: Can you then backtrack about what you decided about being a collective, when you started setting up?

MM: Everyone would discuss everything. There would be no decisions passed...

JH: Every company member at any given time, do you mean by that?

MM: From those early meetings that was what it was going to be. And although people like Linda [Broughton] [initially] and David [Bradford] weren't on the road with us for *Scum*, I know that when we did big meetings they would still be involved. And Linda came back in for *Vinegar Tom* {when it joined the tour of *Scum* from autumn 1976}

But if you were in the show or if you were anything to do with the meetings - the meetings {minutes} books bear that out - meetings got longer, in fact, as the life of the company... And also you were being approached for so many different things, people wanting to do benefits {benefit performances} and stuff. But the meetings and what you were contributing was seen as very important. So who was going to design the poster, we would all decide that together. And particularly in those early days, that was definitely true. Nothing happened without the collective sat down and talked about it.

JH: Weekly meetings or as they were required?

MM: I'm sure we had them at least weekly.

GH: At least weekly.

MM: Because there was always something that needed deciding, particularly in the early days when you were... Obviously whoever was in the office would be trying to throw in a few more dates {for a tour}, and if something happened you'd sit down and talk about it.

JH: And what were the strengths and the weaknesses of that?

GH: Well, we developed a little structure of subcommittees. So there would be the laundry subcommittee, the stage management subcommittee, because our first technical person was Dec.

MM: Yes.

GH: Who was Australian.

MM: Dee Wilson.

GH: And then was replaced when she left by Jenks, Meri Jenkins. But they couldn't do it all on their own. So there would be a rotating show-by-show subcommittee.

And then of course there was the famous 'Sue, Grab it and Run', the accounts subcommittee. Which at one point consisted of me and Roger Allam. I can't remember who else did it, but I just remember that.

Sorry, so back to your question.

JH: And would they report back to the main meeting?

GH: Oh, absolutely.

MM: Yes.

GH: Absolutely. We just came to a point when we realised that doing the books, helping Sue [Beardon] and then later Gus [Garside], or actually well before Sue arrived, doing the books... it was very unwieldy to have 12 people sitting down and saying...

[35.00] So the subcommittee structure evolved. And it actually worked quite well, because of course you had to report back and of course you got slapped around the chops if you'd done something wrong.

JH: Yes, but it was allowing people with those specialisms to have a bit of space...

GH: Yes.

JH: ... to work those things out.

MM: Absolutely. I mean... and different people had different strengths. I think Chrissie Bowler was great at finding places. I mean, our first place was a squat in Camden Square.

GH: Somebody stole my kimono [there].

JH: As an office space?

MM: As an office and we rehearsed a little bit in there before...rehearsal meetings. It was very cold, I remember that. But great at acquiring, finding places.

And I mean she and I used to sometimes go out on her scooter, going around skips, finding things that were needed for props. And bits of furniture. I can remember we found what was a big office desk that went in our first paid-for office, and we found it, of course we couldn't get it out of the back of the skip. It was a wonderful green leather... And I got off, I said it's great, it's great. Naturally the committee had to go back and find somebody to get it back to the office. [In] Goswell Road.

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KD: In 1979 when I was at City University, doing what was then called the Arts Administration MA, I was on secondment with you and that was in Goswell Road. So I recall coming up lots of stairs and there was one floor that was your meeting room and a rehearsal room, and up again to the office.

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JH: So an earlier question was talking about the strengths and weaknesses of the collective.

MM: The amount of time it took to make a decision, it's a bit like turning the Titanic. It could take longer. I think the strengths were that you'd got lots of different views coming in. The weaknesses were that regardless of you working as a collective, some people...you would attach more weight to someone's opinion, and you'd think oh, I really trust David's opinion on that kind of thing, maybe, or Gillian, Gillian knows more about that.

I learnt more about *listening* in those meetings. Because I like to get things done, [but] I realised...

GH: Also, one of the weaknesses is that you are at the mercy of people's emotional hoo-ha. So if somebody was making a point and burst into tears, I always found it extremely difficult to say no after that.

MM: I must remember this, Gillian.

GH: I couldn't bear it. So I think some decisions - not a lot of decisions - some decisions would be made on not the right basis.

JH: But overall do you feel it worked for you at that time?

GH: Oh, it was great.

MM: There's a lovely thing in the book *{Monstrous Regiment: A Collective Celebration 1991, pp lxi-ii}* which was Sandy Bailey talking of being the administrator {1983-1988}, saying how she used the collective by saying 'oh well, I can't tell you that, I'll have to ask the collective'. And then she put the phone down and had a little think to herself, and then phoning back and saying 'well, the collective has decided...'. Knowing that it would be something...

Obviously you had to give the administrator who was in the office powers to make certain decisions. If you'd said we need a six week tour for the next show, you're trusting them to come up with a sensible tour that doesn't involve you driving up and down the country too much. And then you'd complain if they did.

But yes, definite strengths in that I think, for me, I had more points of view, that I possibly didn't agree with, but that would give me insights in[to] what I maybe should consider when it would come to something.

[40.00] And I think it maybe made me more generous in spirit that people's - the person I live with [Russell Keat] would say that's totally untrue, I can tell you right now -

would make me possibly consider before I jumped down someone's throat. Which might sound a weak strength, but in fact for me it was quite a learning curve, listening to that many different points of view, people from such different backgrounds. Who sometimes I felt were politically just in another place from me, further on. Of course it was a steep learning curve in terms of my feminism and things that crop up that hadn't occurred to me, but really...

JH: And how did... Sorry, Katrina...

KD: Just following on from that, because it's clear from what you've just said, Mary, that people came from a range of *theatre* experience and background to the company, but alongside that was there a range of *political* view and experience - or did you all crossover very strongly in terms of theatrical vision and political vision? Were they one and the same thing?

GH: Well actually, that's a very interesting question because looking back on it there were as many political positions and opinions as there were people in the group, probably. But I don't remember that ever being a problem, because indeed as you say, all of that was subsumed into the bigger vision of putting women centre stage, that whole thing.

MM: And I think we were united in that we wanted highly professional work with high production values. And I mean Gillie's favourite phrase was, I don't want to do TV acting.

GH: It paid better. I'd like to do it now!

MM: But if anything those shows that were going [to be put] on, we wanted them to be something that the stage was the place for them. That the imagination, colour, excitement were there, with good quality text.

GH: Which is...

MM: And challenging acting.

GH: Yeah, which is why we asked Chris [Bond] and Claire [Luckham] to write the first play *{Scum}*, because we sat down and we thought, who do we know?... Because that's the other thing, at the beginning it had to be who do you know? Because who are we? 'Dear so and so, would you write us a play?' 'Fuck off.' So it was who do you know.

And I can remember having a sit down and a talk about who do we know who writes the kind of things that you couldn't put on television? They're too big to put on television. And they're too possibly bonkers. Who do we know who's writing that kind of thing? And we all knew Chris.

JH: Chris Bond?

GH: Chris Bond. And he seemed the perfect person, because that was how he wrote. I assume it's how he still writes.

MM: Big bold characters. I realised, when you say the strengths of the collective, it was the first production that I was involved in which I ended up babysitting the writers' children so they could write. And I thought, this is a first. And I suppose as a collective we were keen to also support the *writers*. And Chris Bond had got Liverpool Everyman {appointed as artistic director} after he had started [on *Scum*]...

GH: That's right.

MM: Chris Bond went, naturally - brilliant place for a director to go. But it meant the writing became strung out a bit more. Claire [Luckham] was doing... they'd be writing it together, but Claire was a bit isolated with the children. And I remember babysitting, I remember taking at least one child, it might have been two, to the zoo. And I was thinking, this is more nerve-wracking, I've got somebody else's child to take care of. Will I make a mistake?

But, if you like, the collective's seen it as its responsibility - that you just didn't go 'well, that's a writer's problem'. If it was a problem it was everybody's problem. And you tried to find ways...

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