

Janelle Reinelt on *Enslaved by Dreams*

Extract (pp 174-176) from 'Resisting Thatcherism: The Monstrous Regiment and the School of Hard Knox', by Janelle Reinelt, in Lynda Hart and Peggy Phelan eds, *Acting Out: Feminist Performances*, Michigan University Press 1993 pp 161-180. The full paper can be read in the Commentaries section of this website's ARCHIVE pages.

The Monstrous Regiment productions frequently involve staging nonliterary aspects that come from workshops and collaboration among the various artistic contributors. Sometimes their productions border on performance art. Chris Bowler, who has been a founding member and associated with the company throughout its existence, has fashioned several pieces for the company that illustrate this aspect of their work. During the 1980s she devised *Enslaved by Dreams* and *Point of Convergence* and during the last two years has been working on a new project, provisionally called *Isolation and Cruelty*. These theater pieces share an emphasis on spectacle, a fragmented and non-Aristotelian script, and various musical and aural affects. *Enslaved by Dreams* will serve as a concrete example of this style.

The original impulse for the play came from a workshop held in the 1970s at the Institute for Contemporary Art (ICA), in which the company was working with Caryl Churchill on the notion of "a bunch of women in history meeting in a kind of no man's land" (possibly the genesis for the first part of *Top Girls*). Chris read a biography of Florence Nightingale, which was "lying about the office" and which affected her greatly: "I was very taken with her, her sense of not being able to get at what she wanted to do, being prevented by all sorts of things." She proposed it as a show and was designated producer/director, a new challenge for someone who had primarily seen herself as an actress: "I had very strong ideas about the script, and I looked for a while for a writer, but I didn't want a well-made play." In the end she devised it herself. *Enslaved by Dreams* never names Florence Nightingale but, rather, presents three Florences, named in the program by the colors of their dresses but within the text established as sisters with names of Sally, Celia, and Tamsin.

Although set in Victorian times, the set combined various modern elements with the old ones—thus, a modern filing cabinet next to a nineteenth-century chaise; computer print-outs but old-fashioned pens. The floor of the set was covered with papers and writing then shellacked. The play is heavily dependent on music and special choreography for its tone, using a waltz motif to stitch together the scenic and monologic fragments of the women's experiences. In the "Tea Cup Waltz" actresses danced and did cartwheels while passing cups and saucers. Not every aspect of the mise-en-scene was immediately recognizable. Tubs with prop turds representing the lack of sanitation in Victorian hospitals sometimes went unacknowledged: "People didn't always know what they were seeing—some of it worked on an emotional but not on an intellectual level."²⁶

The simultaneous portrayal of aspects of Nightingale separates out the young girl who loves to dance but yearns for permission to become a nurse, the hard-working matter-of-fact organizer, and the sickly, bedridden woman who beseeches for medical reforms by letter from her bedside. At times the script establishes concrete historical conditions:

Tamsin: I am witnessing a calamity unparalleled in the history of calamities. The British Army has 11,000 men laying siege to Sebastopol, and 12,000 men in hospital. It is being destroyed. Not by losses in battle, but by sickness—and most of it avoidable.²⁷

At other points the personal struggles of the characters are in focus:

Sally: My God what is to become of me. My present life is suicide. Slowly I have opened my eyes to the fact that I cannot now deliver myself from the habit of dreaming, which like gin-drinking is eating out my vital strength. ... I shall never do anything and am worse than dust and nothing. Oh for some strong thing to sweep this loathsome life into the past.²⁸

The gist of the play deconstructs the myth of the historical Florence, while creating an experience, mood, and feeling of longing and frustration. It both distances and draws in; the nonverbal aspects of the production ensure the emotional intertext. Bowler characterizes it negatively as "not quite a movement piece but not quite a play."²⁹ This kind of production marks out the theatrical territory for collaborative, improvisatory work that rests on other-than-literary creation.

NOTES

27. Unpub. MS, *Enslaved by Dreams*, 22.

28. *Ibid.*, 14.

29. Interview with Bowler, 22 June 1989