

DOCUMENT

MEETING BERYL: A CONVERSATION IN COVENT GARDEN, MAY 1982.

The name first caught my eye in October 1978 as I was leafing through *Time Out*. Beryl and the Perils were presenting their first play *Is Dennis really the Menace?* Though I could not attend any of their performances at the time, a few months later I managed to catch one of their lunchtimes show at the I.C.A. (Institute of Contemporary Art) in Pall Mall. The Perils' own opinion was that the one-hour lunchtime production of *Is Dennis...* was better than the full length one, because they had to trim it down to essentials and give it a quicker pace.

Since then Beryl and the Perils have produced two more shows called *Nuts* (1979) and *Got Nulity* (1981). They have toured Britain, were invited in Holland and in New York where they were received with enthusiasm. While conducting a research into feminist theatre around "Women live" in 1982, I met Didi Hopkins, one of the founder-members of Beryl. I asked her a few questions about the group, its birth life and temporary(?) rest. Here is the gist of my conversation with Didi Hopkins.

ROSETTE GLASER : *This is 'Women Live', the first festival of women in performing arts in Britain. Why aren't you in it?*

DIDI HOPKINS : *Because we did not feel we had anything to say just now.*

R.G. : *You did not feel you had to make a statement?*

D.H. : *No, certainly not. The good thing about Beryl is that we work together when we feel like it, when we feel there is something worthwhile to be expressed. Just because there is this "official" recognition of women in entertainment, we don't feel we have to take part. After all, we said it before.*

R.G. : *Yes, in 1978. I remember reading about you in Time Out. How was your show first received?*

D.H. : *With shock... No, seriously, there were a few protests, but on the whole, in the fringe papers, we had good reviews. In fact, we soon became something of a cult. Even to-day, the young performers, many of whom never saw the shows, will all have heard of Beryl and the Perils. (1)*

R.G. : *How was the group formed?*

D.H. : *Like many other groups which were formed at that time, such as Mrs Worthingtons' daughters for instance. It was generally felt there was*

no work around for women. We felt we would like to try working with women, to create something together. Monstrous Regiment and Cunning Stunts are two other groups who started at that time.

R.G. : *How did you meet originally?*

D.H. : *Through personal ads in the radical papers, in Time Out. We had all been looking for other girls to experiment with.*

R.G. : *How did you find you clicked?*

D.H. : *We attended seminars, discussion groups, workshops. We talked about how we felt about things, our life experience. We spent about six weeks just talking to one another; we evolved into a sort of therapy group for one another.*

D.H. : *Professional performers, fed up with what was being offered to us in the business, namely, next to nothing.*

R.G. : *Are you members of Equity?*

D.H. : *We are, now.*

R.G. : *And your personal background?*

D.H. : *Very different from one another. That's what is so interesting about it. There are three founder-members, though we have worked with two other girls. Among the three, there's Christine. She comes from the East End of London, she has a working class background. Professionally, she has sung in musicals, has worked on T.V. She has worked in theatre, both as a bawdy character and as a straight actress. Now Claudie would define herself as middle-class. She was a teacher, has worked in Europe. I am the youngest of the three since I'm 25. The others are 33 and 30.*

R.G. : *How would you define yourself?*

D.H. : *My background you mean? Part artist and part professional I suppose. My experience as a performer has been 3 years studying at Dartington College of Arts and playing the drums.*

R.G. : *Is there a leader in your group?*

D.H. : *Absolutely not. Though we are called Beryl and the Perils, no one specifically is Beryl...If you want to explain things, you can say that we are all Beryls as we step centre stage and then the others become the perils. But the name of the group has nothing to do with anything of the sort.*

R.G. : *You took the name of the typical comic-book girl figure Beryl the Peril, and the title of your show alludes to that other archetypal comic -book character Dennis the Menace. (2) To make things obvious, you dressed yourselves as the cartoon characters.*

D.H. : *Yes. It spelled out our initial purpose. Girls and boys in society. What is expected of girls, what boys get away with. By using the comic -characters we provided a frame of references which anyone in the audience could instantly recognize. The performers appear as the well-know characters though of course, what we show about them never appears in the comics. It's what goes on behind the scenes.*

R.G. : *I notice your use of the word "performers". Why not "actresses"?*

D.H. : *Because we do not just "act". We write, direct, dance, sing, tap-dance, play the drums, sing a-capella... This was the great opportunity for us to do much more than straight acting.*

R.G. : *As you perform, one gets the impression that everything is so spontaneous. But do you ever improvise?*

D.H. : *Absolutely not. Improvisation would kill the pace and pace is essential with our kind of entertainment which relies a lot on stick-slapstick. Our show is zany and fast. Every sentence, every effect has to be weighed. Our shows are totally textured.*

R.G. : *Who writes?*

D.H. : *We all do. We are equal writers; we write our own parts.*

D.H. : *Well, we do not really create a show. We created *Beryl and the Perils* and we started from there. Have you seen all three shows?*

R.G. : *Unfortunately, no. I only saw the I.C.A. lunchtime version. Is *Dennis* really the *Menace*?;...*

D.H. : *That's a pity because we have become much better since then... Anyhow, the first show, *Is Dennis*.... was a series of monologues. We all felt we had something to say about one thing in particular, relationships between girls and boys, men and women. Each of us wrote her piece - we do what we are best at - and made a statement. It was a series of individual sketches. (3) In the second show, *Nuts* we centred on women and madness. We used dialogues, and we had a better structured show. We had actual scenes and an evolution in the plot. (4). In the third show, we have explored relationships. We also brought in two new girls who had not performed before, only acted. The theme of the third show, incidentally was economics power and death. The common denominator of the three shows is that *Beryl* is pitched against the system. And the system is always right.*

R.G. : *Do you define yourself as a feminist group?*

D.H. : *No, not really. We are women who act, but I don't think our theatre is necessarily feminist. We do not specially defend the rights of women. We show that they get a rotten deal, not only as women but also as persons. Men too get a rotten deal. We would like to have a 'personarchy' if I may say so.*

R.G. : *Did your success come as a surprise to you?*

D.H. : *Absolutely. We never believed we could be successful.*

R.G. : *Garish make-up and outrageous costumes are the first striking things about your group. Why did you choose to present yourselves that way?*

D.H. : *The freedom of the clown: to be allowed to say things we wouldn't have dared to say had we played straight. Hiding behind our make-up, we felt different. It's like masks. And we were playing cartoon-characters, outrageous creatures.*

R.G. : *One of the great points critics make out your shows is your use of outrageous language.*

D.H. : *We felt we had to invent a new way of saying things. We needed to break taboos, for the public, but also for ourselves. We were very inhibited at first...*

R.G. : *You tour a lot. What about props, lighting?*

D.H. : *There has been an evolution there, too. We started with practically no props in the first show, and basic lighting. What we needed could easily be taken on tour or found on the spot. With the second show, we used more props and lighting, they developed together with the show. It was interesting and more professional, but it did create problems for touring. The show had to be portable. So we worked out a formula by which the show might be played either with or without props and lighting. The text is important but so is movement. We underline the action by movement, in the tradition of the *comedia dell'arte*. I would like to use mime more than we do.*

R.G. : *You get no problem of understanding abroad?*

D.H. : *We use short words, brief sentences, to punctuate the action rather than explain anything. In Holland and in New York audiences loved it. But in the States they speak English and most people understand English in Holland. I don't know how we would be received in Latin countries...*

R.G. : *Have you any plans for future shows?*

D.H. : *Nothing definite at the moment. After 'Got Nulity' we all felt a need to go our own way and get more individual experience so we could fuel it into the group. We felt we had said everything we had to say for the time being and we could only repeat ourselves if we went on. So we stopped (5). We could have continued; we were asked many times to perform. But we want to be creative, not repetitive. We might put on a new show in 1984 and announce it in bold letters all over: "Beryl is back" or "Big Sister is here". But we don't know yet.*

R.G. : *Have your shows generated spin-offs?*

D.H. : *No, unfortunately not. There was a project of a comic book based on "Is Dennis really the Menace?" but it never really got off the ground. There has been a video-tape of our show in New-York. We hope to get a copy of that. It was a good one in fact.*

R.G. : *I would certainly like to see it. Thank you very much and good luck to you.*

Rosette GLASER
Haute-Alsace

NOTES

(1) In *Understudies, Theatre and Sexual Politics*, Michelene Wandor has this to say about Beryl and the Perils : "Perhaps the most successful of the semi-anarchic shows which opened avenues for a freer female comedy was the first produced by a group called Beryl and the Perils, formed in 1978. Their first show in that year was *Is Dennis really the Menace?* which was about the conditioning of women into fearful and repressed behaviour about their bodies and their sexual lives.... They wore striped and slightly wacky clothes, their faces streaked with make-up - like children who have raided the attic for clothes and their mother's dressing table for decorations". *Understudies*, A Methuen Theatrefile, p. 46. Published in London in 1981.

(2) There are at least two *Dennis the Menace* in cartoondom. An American naughty child, created by Hank Ketcham, and a British character who dwells in the *Beano*. The latter, of course, is the reference here.

(3) Carole Spedding in *SPARE RIB* had this to say: "In this, their first play, Beryl and the Perils use a comic strip cartoon style to explore all the difficulties (and some of the good things) of women's sexuality. I felt confident of their acting abilities, enjoyed their individual performances and immediately warmed to their sensitivity towards each other on stage. Visually, too, they looked good but I came away wishing that they hadn't tried to include so much". While in *Time Out*, Michelene Wandor included this sentence in her review: " - the point about the show is the subversive form, which gives the company a freedom to play with the ideas in a way which makes them challenging but not offensively so."

(4) About *Nuts*, this is what Ann McFerran had to say in *Time Out*: "*NUTS!* is a vivid and chaotic celebration of feminine "madness". It opens with garish witches claspng sparklers dancing around a cauldron chanting: "Lip of lesbian, spit of spinster, mucus of bride etc etc" and it continues to dissect the many unacceptable faces of the "feminine" woman: the guilty anorexic, the self loathing fat girl, a girl who suffers from eczema and yo-yos between extravagant feminine posture and self-hating scratching....Although the material is unwieldy and the production unfocussed, the Perils are canny performers who create some brilliant images about female oppression in a rough, rude show that is constantly entertaining and provocative." The critic in *Spare Rib* also remarked on the first incantation of the witches in *NUTS!* and adds further down "The energy and imagination that this company show can only be applauded. They have the courage to stand there with their over-the-top images and the ability to get away with it."

(5) *Got Nulity*, Beryl's third show, was already considered by several critics to be a repeat, for instance, Ros Asquith : "*Got Nulity* ...combines several of their best sketches (and some not so hot) from previous shows."... "Subtle they ain't: they shout, scream, rant, rave, talk dirty, squeak, bellow, remind you that you can 'be arrested for disturbing the p'lice',... and generally behave in a way that nice, dependent, passive, narcissistic girls should not". A page of the dummy stip based on "*Is Dennis really the Menace?*". These words and situations were part of the show.