

4 SPARE TYRE

Spare Tyre launched their first production, Baring the Weight, in 1979. The show's representation of women and body size, inspired by Susie Orbach's Fat is a Feminist Issue..., was a huge success and gave the group its 'big' image. What started out as a company of six 'slimmed' down to three in 1981: Clair Chapman, Katina Noble, and Harriet Powell. The trio specialised in cabaret and a play-with-music form. Through these two theatrical styles they challenged gender stereotyping. Using comedy, music, and a wide variety of theatrical techniques, they effected a positive re-appraisal of the female body, female sexuality, woman-to-woman relations, etc. In the late 1980s their work moved towards addressing broader social issues as a consequence of internal group development and external response to the Thatcher years. For example, their 1989 production, Gone Shopping, looked at the problems of money and consumerism.

In addition to their shows and cabaret presentations, Spare Tyre also offered a number of workshops. After their first production and the after-show discussions on women and eating disorders, the group became involved in setting up sessions for the Women's Therapy Centre in London. Not all their workshop experience was, however, therapy-based. They were involved in organising a number of theatre-based workshops, most significantly for young people (helping them to set up their own theatre groups), and for women.

Company membership remained constant rather than having different artists come and go, and it was precisely this sense of being a long-standing 'relationship' which

the trio of women brought to their work in the theatre. With the exception of a few comments specific to individual women, the group's members chose, to reflect their long-standing relationship, to respond collectively in the interview which took place in the autumn of 1989. The interview opened with an individual comment from Clair Chapman who talked about the effect Susie Orbach's Fat is a Feminist Issue... had on her in 1978, and the production she wanted to realise in consequence:

As a life-time dieter I was stunned, absolutely amazed by Fat is a Feminist Issue.... After reading it, I kept scanning Time Out (there was no City Limits then) for the theatre board, thinking someone was bound to start a group to do a play about Fat is a Feminist Issue.... I kept looking every week. Then I thought, 'I'm going to start that group.' So I put an advertisement in Time Out, asking for women interested in putting together a play based on Fat is a Feminist Issue... to write to me. I had about eighty replies—tons of letters, ranging from gigantic Spanish dancers stating, 'I weigh twenty stone, I would like to be in your play,' to an anorexic carpenter saying, 'I'd like to build your set.' In short, I had a great variety of replies, including one from Tina. Out of this response, we formed a group of eight which slimmed down to six.

The group explained how they worked from Fat is a Feminist Issue... :

We took our line from Susie's book, but not her lines. In the show we had Clair as a Slimmer of the Year. She would make her entrance dressed in layers of foam rubber and then strip them off in the first scene to show she'd lost a stone. At the end of her stripping, she was left in this white, skimpy, little dress, as she won the Slimmer of the Year contest, but, by the end of the show, she was starting to put the weight on again.

Nancy Roberts, the one very big woman in our cast, played a journalist who starts out as a dieter, but by the end she feels good about herself and stops dieting.

In between the narrative scenes was the figure of the jogger, who represented the universal woman with all the 'Think-Thin' pressures. She was dressed in a skinny, mini, plastic tracksuit, sweating away and jogging. She wobbled her bottom and constantly jogged onto the stage. It was a great send-up of the pressures exerted by the media and advertising on women to be thin. She was a very funny figure, but also tragic. We had originally thought about having a jogger throughout—someone to jog alongside the action. But no one wanted to do it! Now, people heavily into aerobics would probably leap at the chance. Aerobics seems to have taken over from a lot of the diet compulsion.

Only Nancy in *Baring the Weight* was actually very big, weighing around eighteen stone. The rest of us were fairly ordinary. However, we'd all been through the experience of compulsive eating, and the message we really wanted to get across was that compulsive eaters come in all sizes, that you don't have to be fat to have an eating problem.

The choice of name for the group (chosen to fit the first production) did, however, initiate expectations of body size which, as time went on, became frustrating:

The group's name was initially and with great difficulty chosen for the first company with *Baring the Weight* in mind. Everyday somebody would say something like, 'I've got it, I've got it! 'The Michelin Girls!' and we'd all groan! Clair came up with 'Heavy Women', but then we thought people would be frightened off by that. And then we thought of 'Femme Fatale'—with the Fat in capital letters! So Clair went to the accountant with the name, but came back saying, 'He won't take "Femme Fatale".' Finally it was between 'Fat Lip', which we didn't really like, and Spare Tyre.

The big image all started with the first show where Nancy Roberts provided the focus for the publicity. Obviously, with a group called Spare Tyre you're going to use the image of a big woman—and Nancy was much more interesting to look at than the rest of us. She was gorgeously large and beautiful. She went on to do a lot of exercise classes for women who were big, and to write a book about it. We never got as much coverage as we did for that first show, and that was largely due to Nancy spending her life on the phone saying, 'You have got to cover this show—it's the most important thing that has happened in the whole world!' There was a hook to hang things on—and that was Nancy. Also, as the show came soon after the book with its challenging new idea, people were keen to cover it. Since then, the 'big' image has stayed with us. It can get annoying at times. For example, whenever we're interviewed for radio the opening statement is always, 'But you're not fat,' and then you find yourself spending a self-defensive ten minutes explaining why you're not particularly fat any more.

It was not just the performance which was important to Spare Tyre in this first show, but, like many of the late-1970s women's groups, the after-show discussion was also significant, both for the performers themselves and for their audiences:

Performances of *Baring the Weight* were always followed by a discussion. We had a very good review in *Time Out* which claimed to enjoy the discussion as much as the show. Discussions tended to be very energetic. For example, in our first two weeks in Croydon, where there were a lot of housewives and slimmers in the audience, the discussions were very heated. There were people standing up and saying 'I've lived on Carnation Slender all my life, I'm never going to ever eat it again,' and somebody else would cheer them. People would talk about the things they'd done—

stuff like binged on raw bread dough. It was like one of those 'I'm-going-to-get-up-evangelical-release-my-sins-to-the-world' meetings, but all about eating problems.

In this way, the group's work took them beyond the boundaries of theatre into the realm of therapy for women with eating disorders:

In conjunction with the Women's Therapy Centre we started setting up self-help groups based on Susie Orbach's book, giving women a chance to know that there would be some follow-up on that theme, letting them know there was something else they could do.

We still run sessions for the Women's Therapy Centre—the only ones left who are still prepared to set them up! We have a set pattern for organising these sessions. We set up a self-help group and then three months later we go back to the group to find out what's happening. Then they tell us what's going on in the group, what's working, or not working, how they're feeling, and so on. However, there are other groups which we run on a particular theme where our involvement is much more than the role of facilitator. For example, Tina has just finished working with one group, in which she ran three sessions on sexuality and food. This concentrated on one particular aspect or theme of women and eating disorders, and was in fact a particularly heavy and intense series of sessions. We've also run sessions on women and anger and food, self-nourishment. There's a small group of women who work on eating problems at the Therapy Centre. Sometimes the groups are led for a year, sometimes they're just one-off workshops, theme-related week-ends, or something like that.

We're workshop leaders, not therapists, and we simply get invited to lead sessions. Spare Tyre still has an advice and information centre, and we regularly get phone calls and letters from women 'in desperate straits

in Doncaster', or 'can't stop eating in Skegness', or 'want to know of a group in Edinburgh'. Spare Tyre is generally listed as a group which offers health and advice on eating problems. Tina is mainly involved in this work which is quite separate from our other drama and music workshops which the three of us do.

The group felt strongly that issues on women's health and eating had continued to need addressing in the 1980s:

Weight Watchers have trebled their intake now and they're a member of Heinz Ltd. Amazingly, on the Weight Watchers diet, you can now eat baked beans and ketchup, which you couldn't eat before they were owned by Heinz! It's very sad. You hear such horror stories from people who come from the group—things are worse than ever. Very desperate people have become bulimic. The promotion of the 'Slim-is-Beautiful' ethic is still widespread; it coerces women into the dieting syndrome and the mental tortures of compulsive eating.

We still get plenty of calls about doing shows for health events, though we ourselves have moved on from health because we ran out of things to say in that area. But we've kept up a cabaret show which has a lot of material suitable for health conferences or women's health groups.

As was generally the case for women's theatre groups setting up in the late 1970s, funding was thin on the ground. It was necessary for Spare Tyre to spend the statutory two to three years proving their worth:

For our first show we had one hundred and fifty pounds from Hamlyn who published *Fat is a Feminist Issue*.... We didn't get funding for the second show. In fact, we didn't get funding for the first two-and-a-half years we were together until the wonderful GLC funded us at the beginning of 1983.

Our second show was *How Do I Look?*, which also focused on images of women. We were still operating as a company of six then, but, finances being what they were, we cut back. It seems that groups tend to peter out after eighteen months to two years because of funding—especially if there's no funding. When the original idea of 'Yes, we're going to show the world' is over, you then tend to think, 'Well it's not really very much fun being this poor, for this long. I think it's time to move on.' So the group really fell apart.

But Tina kept getting bookings and suggested that the three of us put together a few songs. A Peterborough Women's Health Conference was begging us to get together again. So we did. We put together an hour's show, using some songs from the original production, and writing some new material. That was the first show for the three of us, called *Woman's Complaint*.

This show was full of anything and everything! There's a wonderful poster by Judy Farrar, the woman who does most of our design work, which has a husband sitting in a chair with his wife using a kind of conveyor belt. The husband's mouth is open, and this cup of tea is being poured into it, and the food is on its way to him as well. A wonderful image! We had lots of things in it from our original show—things to do with compulsive eating, self-image, contraception, babies, smoking. Our position then was: if it's happened to us, it's probably happened to other women too. So, for about the first five or six years, everything we did (except for a song about anorexia) was based on things which had happened to us or to friends of ours.

So *Woman's Complaint* was the first little cabaret we did. Since then we have always run a cabaret which operates in tandem with a new show, on a whole new subject. We can actually tailor a cabaret show to fit almost any area, because we've been doing so many shows, on so many subjects, for so many years.

In terms of their other shows, Spare Tyre outlined how music was central to their particular style of women's theatre, and how they individually contributed to the musical element:

We have adopted the format of our first show, *Baring the Weight*, which was a musical, or play with music. Since then, each new show, apart from one which had more of a cabaret format, has been a play with music.

We work with music for several reasons. There are lots of things you can say in songs that people will not listen to as well in another form. Also, we all love singing, and Harriet's a real musician.

HARRIET: I'm a musician more than a performer. I became a performer, but I trained as a musician, though in a very different way from what I'm doing now. I was at the Royal Academy of Music. I had to unlearn all that. I specialised in keyboards—organ and piano—and have picked up others on the way. Clair also plays the piano and Tina does a little. We're all musical so it's obvious we're going to use these skills.

TINA: Clair and Harriet are both brilliant songwriters. Clair hasn't had formal training, but is one of these people who has a natural ear for songs and lyrics.

HARRIET: Yes, Clair really started all this. I'd only written kids' songs before I joined the group at the end of *Baring the Weight* in 1980. I knew Tina from working with her in a children's theatre company and I went to see the show (I'd just given up smoking, so everything I heard I was relating to smoking.) Then the original pianist left and Tina rang me up and said, 'We need a pianist,' and I found myself having to quickly learn all the songs for a show the next week. I appeared in the last two performances of *Baring the Weight* and was the pianist in *How Do I Look?* which also involved the bigger group. And then I just stayed. For me,

we have got much tighter and more sophisticated and more professional, have improved our music, etc. We know that the worst thing you can do is to churn out the same old stuff and stagnate. After ten years you have to keep pushing on.

The group felt strongly that women's theatre companies, like theirs, were regarded as ephemera. This they identified as linked to the way in which 'feminist' had become a dirty word during the Thatcher Years:

There is a way in which women's theatre groups and women's politics are now viewed as dated. Feminist is the dirtiest word in the world now. Feminism, like so many ideas or movements on the Left, has been reduced to connotations of craziness or lunacy, and the good things it stood for have all been left out. So many young people today are not interested in politics, or rather, their politics is money. So their outlook on life is very different from our own backgrounds and histories which are rooted in the politics of the '60s and '70s—the abortion marches and protests, etc.

Feminism didn't have the kind of central organisation you might have found in a socialist group, for example. It was much more concerned with things happening at a personal level—the 'Personal as Political'. Feminism happened to women up and down the social scale—to women of different shades of Red and Blue—and affected women who'll now be saying, 'I'm not a feminist,' when in fact they believe in many of the issues central to equality for women.

Due to this hostile attitude to feminism, Spare Tyre had had to think carefully about marketing their group in order not to alienate potential bookers or audiences:

In terms of bookings we're generally known as a women's theatre group. Occasionally we come across wariness about our being a feminist group. So Tina sometimes sends out a press review or publicity to

reassure or persuade bookers. Mostly bookers will take our work because they have either heard about it or seen it and liked it.

We don't use the feminist label because we don't want to use slogans or words that might frighten some women off. We're trying to encourage women, who perhaps haven't thought politically, to come to the theatre and hear what we have to say. We want to draw them in, not alienate them. Someone wrote of us recently 'They may be feminists, but they're family viewing!' We're proud to be feminists but prefer a softer, more accessible image.

We can't recall ever using the word feminist in our shows, but we bring our feminist experiences and outlook on life to our work. We look for ways of getting women to listen to what we have to say. For example, in *Laugh Lines*, the story of our lives, we needed to include Clair's experience of meeting Geraldine, the woman she lives with. We had to puzzle over how to handle this in the show in a way which would overcome prevalent hostile attitudes to lesbians. What we did was to have Clair coming out in the second half, by which time the audience felt an empathy for her and were therefore more open to her situation and feelings.

So we undercut the prejudicial image of lesbians as heavy, tub-thumping dykes. We promote an honest image of lesbians in our work—and hopefully that's been a way to counteract prejudice and lesbian stereotypes. Just as feminist is a dirty word, so too is lesbian. We're doing our bit to get the truth back into those words—and we're proud of it.

When we went on the televised *Weight Watchers* debate with Susie Orbach, we tried to say to all the women in the audience, with their blond hair and their blue eyes, 'Feminism is just commonsense.' But they were all shouting back, 'You're feminists, you're feminists,' and simply getting hysterical. We were

Daniel in the lion's den—three feminists who were eaten!

One of the problems which Spare Tyre had increasingly found itself up against was the competition for London bookings, in conjunction with the changing attitudes of reviewing bodies, and the loss of personal booking contacts. Additionally, their group size, image, and material kept them very much on the fringe circuit and out of certain larger, possibly more up-market venues:

London is getting more difficult for bookings. There are fewer venues available in the city and these tend to operate on a weekly-fee basis. Only outside of London can you command proper fees which financially are much better. Also, there's much more emphasis on cabaret in the city these days, and even though we still do our old style of cabaret, we don't want that to be the only thing we're seen doing in London.

Also, *Time Out* will not review us any more—they say they won't list anybody performing in a community centre, so that whole area is shut off. When we first set out it was a question of 'Where are you? We've got to review you.' Just like the Arts Council who used to go to groups to suggest they applied for a grant—can you imagine that happening now?

Part of the problem is that there has been an enormous turnover of people since we started. For example, a few months ago, there was another company doing a show based on *Fat is a Feminist Issue...*, and the review said, 'Here is a novel idea'—but there was no mention of us, no mention that it had been done before. We can only assume that there must be a much younger reviewing body—people who haven't necessarily followed us. There just seems to be this assumption that we're hanging on, not that we might have developed and be doing very different things and have got better with experience. The emphasis is on the new and the young. We welcome the young, which is

why we do the youth productions, but it does seem unfair that we should be swept aside. We are only in our late thirties, but nevertheless we do feel left out, that everything these days seems aimed at a youth culture, people in their twenties—but not beyond.

Also, in terms of getting bookings there have been a lot of changes and original contacts have been lost. For example, we had a strong contact with the Albany for years, bookings every year, and sell-out audiences. It was our favourite London venue. But once that contact had gone we lost the continuity of bookings. Last year we were billed as a double act with the *Insinuendos* at the Albany, but this year we didn't even get a booking. Probably, there's a new booker who has no idea about our work, no idea that we used to do workshops in the area, working with local women and creating our own local following. On the other hand, we recently had our first West Midlands tour where we were relatively unknown, but had sell-out performances and have been invited back.

We do tend to fall a bit between two stools which is a drawback for some bookers. In the case of some venues like the Drill Hall, for example, we're not quite big enough. We're a kind of Chamber Group. Also, we haven't gone up-market enough, like *Fascinating Aïda*, whose material was rather bland and commercially geared. Consequently, our political songs are not echoing round the Hackney Empire which is a shame! 'They're not Art' is used as an argument against us for bigger bookings. We're seen as a group who thump out songs, not a group who might have a well-crafted piece of theatre with music, and this can be very frustrating.

We haven't had any 'hype', like *Fascinating Aïda* or the *Raving Beauties*. Perhaps if we'd had a marketing or publicity person things might have been different. But essentially, we're far less mainstream than they are and prefer to remain on the fringe in a more political position.