

## **Striking the Balance: celebrating 40 years fight for equal pay.**

After a gruelling general election campaign we definitely need something to cheer us up. *Striking the Balance*, performed by the talented Mikron company and sponsored by the TUC, might be just the ticket.

In the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary year of the 1970 Equal Pay Act this new production tells the story of the fight for equal pay. The show – full of Laugh Out Loud moments as well as poignancy – will be performed in union and community venues, pub gardens, and at canal locks throughout the summer. Its premiere performance was enthusiastically received in Huddersfield's Stephen Batley theatre on 1st May. The sell-out audience loved the humour, songs and some great acting.

The tour is an opportunity for a fun and informal evening social for union branches or groups of friends wanting to have a drink while watching great agit-prop acting. Its live informal theatre at its best.

*Striking the Balance*, set against the turbulent backdrop of the 1960's, 70's and 80's, tells the story of three working women who take on the might of a discriminatory establishment. It is fast-paced, inventive and fun. The moving journey introduces a host of colourful characters, including the Ford sewing machinists, where the story begins, as well as special guest appearances from 'Red Queen' Barbara Castle and the Iron Lady herself. It light-heartedly charts the ups and downs of fighting discrimination at work.

I was delighted at the May Day premiere by the historical accuracy of the fictional story acted out by the versatile four actors, who changed characters and gender with the switch of a hat and pinny. Most of the little incidents in the show were based on the recollections of interviewees in the TUC equal pay oral history films *Recording Women's Voices*, the main source for the Mikron script-writers. They managed to tell a complicated story with unerring simplicity.

Two story-lines run parallel: Winners Bread factory - where in 1969 Mary Arthur started to wonder why she, like the Ford sewing machinists, was paid a 'women's rate' and had to hide her pregnancy in order to avoid getting the sack because she was married. Mary's long fight to get the benefits of the 1975 Sex Discrimination Act is interposed with contemporary scenes where her home care worker - taking her own equal value case - is helping Mary's daughter clear her possessions after her death, reminiscing about the stories and photos of feisty Mary. It's a clever mechanism to deal with the complicated story of the radical changes for working women during our life-times. Older members of the audience will recognise much, while younger members will be reminded how hard it has been to win the fairness and equality they take for granted.

Inspired by the heroic stories of machinists from Ford Dagenham, cleaners from Belfast, dinner ladies from Yorkshire and Julie Hayward - the Cammell Laird cook who won the first landmark equal value victory - *Striking the Balance* chronicles the day to day realities of the struggle for equal pay. It deals with the conflicting pressures on equal pay applicants and their union reps, showing how individual union officers can – and have – made real differences to members' lives. The union official in the show was strongly based on the real life story of Pete Allen,

the T&G officer who took a record number of early successful equal pay claims on behalf of Hull fish packers.

There are scenes that many will recognise – the confusion of Employment Tribunal applicants facing hostile questions from the employers' barrister (Mary, like one of the Belfast hospital cleaners, was sick with apprehension on the first day of her hearing), being thrown out of a taxi on the way to the ET hearing because the driver 'didn't believe in equal pay' (as were the speech therapists on their way to their House of Lords appeal), and a union rep who is torn between the conflicting demands of women members and employer threats of bankruptcy if women were treated equally –like Pete Allen he finally comes out strongly on the side of the women.

History sometimes needs no dressing up to be funny. The scenes of a 'squiffy' Alan Clarke reluctantly introducing the 1984 Equal Value Amendment (as demanded by the European Commission) to a late night session of the House of Commons and Mr Winner resisting the guidance of the newly formed Equal Opportunities Commission by changing the names of men and women's jobs in his factory brought the house down.

Perhaps the star turn of the evening was a life like appearance of Mrs Thatcher (wearing a specially commissioned wig, which only arrived on the morning of the first performance) singing 'The Lady's Not for Turning'. How this song will go down with audiences in some of the middle England venues on the tour remains to be seen – but it will be a hit with union supporters and the women who have lived this story.

On 22 May 2010 we will have had an Equal Pay Act for 40 years but there remains an eye watering pay gap of 36 per cent for women part-time workers, compared with male full-time workers.

Striking the Balance is fun and funny – but it also reminds us that the struggle is not over. Yet.

Catch this great show somewhere near you during the summer and tell your friends about it.

*Striking the Balance will be touring Yorkshire, Merseyside and Manchester, the Midlands, London and the south-east, and the south-west between June and September 2010. Most performances will be in pubs, union or community venues or on the Inland Waterways. An autumn tour will include Scotland, Ruskin College and a performance at the Ford Dagenham plant where the story began in 1968.*

*For further details and tour venues and dates see*

<http://www.mikron.org.uk/strikingBlurb.php>

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