

Out of the box

SHELLEY MARSDEN talked Ireland, history and women with John Terry, the talented young director of *The Ladies Cage* - 21/03/07

The Ladies Cage, a historical play penned by Irish poet Maureen McManus, premieres this month at London's Finsborough Theatre. Inspired by the life of one of Ireland's forgotten females, the sister of National leader Charles Parnell, it is a powerful piece of revival theatre, which reveals just how great a part one woman had to play in freeing Ireland from British rule – and herself and other women from the cage that society placed them in.

What is the play about?

The play is set at the time of Charles Parnell and the Land League, and looks in particular at Charles' sisters, at Anna Parnell particularly and the Ladies' Land League, which was quite a forgotten piece of Irish history, relatively speaking. Hers was a very early sort of female political movement, working towards alleviation of rent at the time, and this play follows the battle that ensued between Charles and his sister over these issues. It is a revisiting of a part of history that is familiar to a lot of Irish people, but with a new take on a lot of it.

What are the big themes?

Feminism features very strongly in terms of women's rights and their involvement in politics. A lot of it is about the way women work in politics, about how it's often very different from how men work in politics. It's also about families, negotiating with each other and being fair to each other, there's a lot of that in it. And it's also about charity and politics, if you look at it in a broader sense.

Is it what you'd call a 'heavy' play?

It's pretty light actually; there's the sense of this group of women at the centre of it. It's almost like a female gang, a sort of 'Ocean's Eleven'. So you've got this extraordinary, spirited group of people who have this power in their hands that they've never had before, and that nobody around them has. It's quite a human treatment, that's not too tied up in history. It's about people living through that time and coming out of it. It moves very fast, it's quite comic, there's a huge range of characters, music and singing. It's quite a colourful tapestry.

Who was Anna Parnell?

She is a very intriguing character because she is ahead of her time, in terms of her opinion and attitudes. She's courageous in terms of her engagement in politics and in society. But she's also socially quite awkward – she finds it hard to hold down relationships with other people, finds it hard to work on easy terms with the people around her. There's a lot of tension in her character.

Review, Blanche Marvin

****THE LADIES CAGE by MAUREEN McMANUS director JOHN TERRY décor CLEO PETTITT music director TYRONE LANDAU light /sound DANNY SEARLE with JAMIE BELTON ric man/judge/dillon, COLM GORMLEY ric man/michael davit/henry george, TRACY KEARNEY bridget/jennie deputy for ladies, LUCIENNE McEVOY anna parnell, REBECCA MORDAN fanny/ Katherine writer for ladies, NATHAN RIMELL charles parnell, KAREN WINCHESTER margaret/kate Maloney accountant for ladies**

This is an epic piece of work which is a gift in historical playwriting as it pertains to Anna Parnell a young Irish woman who coming from a household of political fighters sought her own way. This was the time when women were first accepted into University in Ireland.

What she instigated was a concept far more advanced than has ever been acknowledged and credit must be given to this extraordinary woman whose unique work has been forgotten and should be brought to attention. She fought against the eviction of the poor with her Ladies Land League when the peasant farmers could not pay the imposed taxes during the Land Wars. She defined to the police that they could only enforce laws which were legislated by the government and could not create laws they wished to enforce for the landlords. She fought each battle on a legal basis and paid debts to keep families sheltered in their cottages.

Her sister Fanny raised money in America while Anna kept her team of women together inexperienced as they were. Brother Charles was constantly aided in his political life by his sisters but when it came to conflicting with his career he forced closure on the Ladies Land League first by curtailing their money and then by overt action.

Fanny became ill and died which struck a terrible blow to Anna, a loss from which she could not recover. She never spoke with Charles again and her ladies all went on to further political battle.

In the tiny Finborough, a set is structured that literally looks like a cage in its wooden frame but converts easily by a chair or desk to each location whether it's London or Ireland between 1879 and 1882.

The period is reconstructed and the songs of that era are sung with such sweet appeal. The direction moves smoothly from scene to scene with a cast of dedicated and truthful actors that transport you into the place and time of the play.

There is such imaginative use of space and sound in telling a vital story through the skill of all the actors and not just one to be singled out, and in the clear-sightedness of the director who sensitively staged the piece.