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Releasing the ladies from their historical cages

A new play by Maureen McManus reveals the pivotal and little-known role played by women in the Land War, and Anna Parnell in particular, writes Bernard Adams

Three years ago the writer Maureen McManus had not heard of Anna Parnell, although she had a school history-book knowledge of her celebrated brother, Charles Stewart. But now Anna, a Victorian New Woman, is the heroine of Maureen's first staged play, *The Ladies' Cage*, now running at the Finborough Theatre in London and moving to the Royal Exchange in Manchester next month.

The title of the play refers to the special section of the House of Commons where Victorian women were permitted to watch the men debating in the chamber below. *The Ladies' Cage* tells how Anna and her sister Fanny set up the Ladies' Land League and, with the help of determined women such as Jenny O'Toole (much later Senator Jenny Wyse Power) and the poet Katharine Tynan, ran the Land War campaign in 1881-1882 while the "uncrowned king of Ireland" was in prison.

McManus is from Athlone and now lives in Prague. The idea for the play came from Rebecca Mordan of Scary Little Girls Productions. Mordan was teaching history to supplement her earnings as an actor when she found that women had been airbrushed out of the Land War. "So I was delighted to find a book, *Unmanageable Revolutionaries*, by the Irish historian Margaret Ward, charting the role played by these amazing women who did so much to liberate Ireland from the landlord system, and themselves from the figurative Ladies' Cage," says McManus.

With these prompts from England and Ireland, Maureen McManus set to work. "It was an interesting remit. I hadn't heard of Anna Parnell and I didn't know that she had a sister who was also political. Fanny was quite famous at the time: she wrote striking rebel poems which were set to music; and they even used to sell lockets with her picture in them."

Margaret Ward, who became the play's historical consultant, characterises the two sisters neatly: "Fanny was the more inspirational - in photographs she wears hats, but Anna is more soberly dressed. She is more of the New Woman, challenging traditional roles and frustrated by the limitations of the Ladies' Cage."

Ward provided McManus with valuable contemporary newspaper accounts of Anna and Fanny's activities. The doings of the Ladies' Land League may have been well-known at the time, but its women protagonists have largely fallen through the cracks of historiography. "The men in the play - if you Google them, you'll find loads of stuff; if you Google the women, there's practically nothing," says McManus.

"As I worked on the drafts it became clear that there was one story I wanted to tell - the story of Anna, who found her freedom through politics. My first draft covered the whole of her life - she lived until 1911 and died at the age of 59 in a drowning accident at Ifracombe in North Devon." Anna was hard up, and sad that she and her brother never spoke after the split, but she had remained feisty and independent.

GRADUALLY THE FOCUS narrowed and McManus began to concentrate on two key years in the early 1880s, the key moments in the Land War. She admits there was "pulling and tugging" between the private story of Anna's ultimate betrayal by her brother, and the public narrative of how Anna and her friends, over a short, intense period, made a vital contribution. They opposed the landlords, many of whom came from their own social class; they opposed the police who were trying to enforce the law on the landlords' behalf; they showed determined passive resistance at evictions during the rent strike; and they understood that, ultimately, ownership of the land had to pass from landlord to tenant.

Director John Terry helped at a later stage by workshopping the play. For him a key line is when one of the women says: "If we hadn't done this we'd have done nothing." He sees it not as a polemical feminist piece, but "matrifocal story-telling" about an historical event "where women were there and taking part in a fundamental and central way, but nobody has noticed". And the outcome? Two years of history have been fitted into two hours on stage.

The Finborough is a small theatre and the scope of the piece is huge - agrarian evictions, the House of Commons, the Parnell mansion at Avondale - and the scenes are short. The first act exposition stuttered, but when the second act conflict between the cynical Charles Stewart and the honest and shrewd Anna sparked, the story came to life. There is an excellent comic scene where a policeman decides the best way to deal with a passively resisting Ladies' Land Leaguer is to propose to her.

Nathan Rimell is powerful and ruthless as Parnell, perfectly capable of engendering a folie à deux with Kitty O'Shea. Lucianne McEvoy is a beautiful and touching Anna - although sometimes she might have been a bit sharper and more commanding.

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