

The Irish World (theirishworld.com)

Theatre Review...

The Ladies Cage, by Maureen McManus By Richard Woulfe - 13/04/07

There is scarcely a major town in the Republic without a Parnell Street. What is being commemorated is the man responsible for one of the biggest “what if’s” in Ireland’s history – what if Parnell hadn’t been toppled by scandal and instead his Irish Parliamentary Party had achieved Home Rule. However, Parnell had two sisters also active in politics and it is these who are commemorated in Maureen McManus’ play The Ladies Cage.

As well as the drive for Home Rule, Ireland in the early 1880’s was in the throes of a campaign for land reform. This was far more pressing for those in the countryside as the spectre of another great famine loomed. The Land League was set up in order to achieve greater security of tenure, and in doing so encouraged tenants to withhold rents. Parnell decided to back the Land League, an action which brought him enormous support in Ireland but to the Westminster government it appeared as though he was promoting an attack on private property and thereby sedition. When Parnell and other leaders were arrested, it was the Ladies Land League which carried on the fight.

Women at that time were expected not to be visible in politics. They were needed in order to raise money and do unpaid administrative work but their function was meant to be supportive and no more. With the men in prison, Anna Parnell and other ladies suddenly found themselves thrust into the limelight. For once they were out of society’s cage.

What follows is a powerful story of female courage and resistance. Women, like all the Irish people, were considered unable to govern themselves, but here they show strength of character that puts the men to shame. Parnell may have been the “uncrowned King of Ireland”, but it is his sister who really had the interest of the country at heart (Parnell comes across as a consummate politician – shrewd but unprincipled).

This play, though of necessity top-heavy in fact, is much more than a history lesson. Seven actors, all of a high calibre, take on many different roles. I will mention Lucianne McEvoy as the indefatigable Anna Parnell, Jamie Belton as a comic RIC sergeant (he can put on a brilliant Cork accent), and Nathan Rimell as a most-plausible Parnell, but all the other performers play their part

too. The director, John Terry, must also be commended for the steady pace, inclusion of songs, and inventive use of the Finborough Theatre's space.

A test of whether a play is any good is whether it can sustain the interest after the interval. Here, we become even more engrossed as the story of the Ladies Land League unfolds. I won't give away the ending but I can say that it is true to the aims of the writer. Maureen McManus wishes to take women out of the margins of the past and show how their ideas were often so much more enlightened. Perhaps that is the big "what if" in history. Highly enjoyable drama.

Timothy Ramsden, Reviewsgate

Timothy Ramsden 1 April

1880s female struggle in Ireland reclaimed from the bog of history.

Charles Stewart Parnell, dashing champion of Irish home-rule, beloved of ladies and brought down by his liaison with one of them, had two sisters. Franny went to America but Anna - Maureen McManus' principal subject - stayed to give her brother secretarial help.

Anna knew how much Charles needed such assistance and used it to bargain with him to add women's rights to his nationalist demands. With like-minded female associates she formed the Ladies Land League, parallel body to the male organisation

The Protestant Parnell and Catholic Michael Davitt formed their Land League to protect poor tenant farmers and give them eventual independence from British landlords. And landladies; McManus' example of an evicting owner shows class, as well as sex, dividing society.

Parnell's easier alliance with Davitt than acceptance of his sister's activity shows the same mindset that has led to Anna's eclipse in history. The brother shows an emotional repression paralleling the Irish Constabulary's physically vicious eviction of women tenants.

Meanwhile, the aim of forcing lower rents through organised non-payment displays a powerful sense of achievable aims; and Anna is less open to compromise than her brother.

Nathan Rimell's peacock-proud Parnell, commanding in manner and voice contrasts the quiet, intelligent assertiveness of Lucianne McEvoy's Anna. McEvoy's performance emerges from the ensemble, which separates into 3 male actors, Parnell and bullying officialdom (only Colm Gormley's Fenian Davitt suggests someone more complex), and 4 female, suffering tenantry or organised women.

Yet within the Ladies' Land League tensions and differences boil up. And they think up the legal sleight-of-hand that hits back when Parnell, losing interest in land reform in favour of Home Rule, deliberately bankrupts his sister's organisation.

The Ladies' Cage, a screen keeping women observers apart in the House of Commons, stands for their suppression in politics, society and history. Cleo Pettitt's overarching wooden structure aptly encloses characters between 2 banks of audience, towering over them officiously.

McManus gives new life to some very lively women, re-assessing stereotypes

of the 19th-century female role. John Terry's lively production and a good cast with McEvoy quietly formidable make for an individual, engrossing 2 hours.

Margaret/Kate Malony: Karren Winchester
Bridget/Jenny O'Toole: Tracy Kearney
Franny Parnell/Prosecution Lawyer/Katherine Tynan: Rebecca Morden
Anna Parnell: Lucianne McEvoy
Charles Stewart Parnell/Major Lloyd: Nathan Rimell
Process Server/Michael Davitt/RIC Man/Henry George: Colm Gormley
Judge/John Dillon/RIC man: Jamie Belton

Director: John Terry
Designer: Cleo Pettitt
Lighting/Sound: Danny Searle
Musical Director: Tyrone Landau
Costume: Mia Flodquist
Voice coach: Richard Ryder
Fight director: Haruka Kuroda
Assistant director: Alex Summers

Alistair Smith, The Stage

Anna Parnell - the lesser known sister of Irish political leader Charles Stewart Parnell - has been unjustly overlooked by history. Or so posits Maureen McManus' *The Ladies Cage*, dealing with the plight of both Anna and her not-so merry band of nascent feminists in 19th-century Ireland.

The problem, or at least the main problem, with McManus's version of events, is that in asserting Anna's forgotten history, it is so fiercely single-minded that one cannot help but doubt its veracity.

The production has many merits - notably in the staging and the cast, who universally are excellent - but objectivity would not appear to one of them. Indeed, it often feels more a lecture than a play and one which fails to see history in its many shades of grey.

Anna is portrayed as a faultless and principled idealist, while her brother Charles is cast as an arrogant and slightly incompetent glory-hunter, leaving little room for anything of the astute politician in him.

Irish folk songs punctuate the action, but despite a wonderful performance from Lucianne McEvoy as the determined and feisty Anna and some innovative staging - a traverse set is squeezed into the Finborough - the production, lacking a discursive edge, is left feeling like a jog through history which could have been much more interesting had its author not carried such an axe to grind.

It is a shame because in the end, the production's unblinkered loyalty to Anna ends up doing her a disservice, by turning her into an ideal rather than a flesh and bones person and converting an interesting period of history into a disappointingly dry play.

The Guardian

★★★★☆ Finborough, London

Michael Billington
Monday March 26, 2007
Guardian Unlimited

Women, we are often told, get written out of the history books. Maureen McManus has come up with a perfect example in Anna Parnell, sister of the famous Irish nationalist politician. The result is a passionately feminist and ferociously partial play that celebrates the contribution of militant women to Irish history.

Set in the period from 1879 to 1882, McManus's play deals with Anna Parnell's formation of the Ladies' Land League. While her brother, Charles, was playing politics at Westminster, or in prison, Anna and her team were actively fighting the land war prompted by local rent rises at a time of potential famine: supporting tenants suffering wrongful eviction and standing up to vindictive Anglo-Irish landowners.

In rescuing Anna Parnell from oblivion, McManus needlessly vilifies her brother. She alleges that he betrayed the Ladies' Land League, bullied Anna and destroyed her sister's private happiness, but I'd have thought you have to give Parnell some credit for his political skill in uniting the Fenians and the Catholic church in pursuit of Home Rule.

But McManus's purpose is to laud the achievements of forgotten Irish women, and this she does in a series of punchy scenes suggesting that, while men dream, women get down to work. It's a rolled-up-sleeves kind of play punctuated, in John Terry's swift-moving production, with a wealth of Irish song. Lucianne McEvoy lends Anna exactly the right bright-eyed singlemindedness, and there is vigorous support from Tracey Kearney as an incipient republican and Rebecca Mordan, who initiated the whole project for Scary Little Girls, as a politicised poet. It is not the subtlest of plays, but it certainly fulfils its aim of raising consciousness.

Time Out

The Ladies' Cage

Until Apr 14 [Finborough Theatre](#), 118 Finborough Rd, SW10 9ED [MAP](#)

Rating: ★★☆☆☆☆

At times much better than this star-rating suggests, and often much worse, the patchy quality of 'The Ladies Cage' reflects its patchy structure. The Irish Land Question was not a simple one, and writer Maureen McManus, by telling the story of The Ladies' Land League in short, nearly unrelated scenes light on basic fact, doesn't help the uninitiated. We are told that the League, who took over from the men's version in 1881 when its leaders were all arrested, dared to do what the men would only talk about. The precise nature of both their business and the men's before them, however, should be easier to grasp over two hours.

Yet there's a charm to the confusing proceedings. John Terry's rapid, busy direction suggests a movement swept up in action rather than easily traced ideas. McManus, pursuing a resolutely feminist agenda, picks some sweet episodes to relate: one in which a soldier offers to marry a Leaguer for munitions information is priceless. The show also benefits from Lucianne McEvoy's fine central performance as Anna Parnell, as humbly resolute and fierily pragmatic a heroine as you could wish for.

Unfortunately, there's coarse acting around her, which McManus' scattergun narrative approach gives every opportunity to take centre stage. Producer Rebecca Mordan should be praised highly for fostering this interesting show from conception to stage, but overburdens herself with the lead supporting role. Meanwhile, Terry's obsessive use of poignant fiddle-de-dee folk songs just gets trying.

Kieron Quirke, Mon Mar 26

EXTRA! EXTRA!

Fiona Doyle

Every Irish schoolchild has heard of the ‘uncrowned King of Ireland.’ Charles Stuart Parnell is an integral part of Irish political history. He is most famous perhaps for the establishment of the Land League in 1879 and his fight for Home Rule, all of which played no small role in the eventual formation of the Irish Free State in 1922.

The ‘uncrowned Queen of Ireland’ however, is another story entirely. She has been hidden away by history, her footsteps becoming a soft tread, her voice a faint echo. But there was once a time when Anna Parnell was as integral a part of Irish political history as her famous brother. She was the woman responsible for leading the Ladies Land League, a branch of the original League established to ‘hold the fort’ in the event of any arrests of the men. In 1881, Parnell was indeed arrested and Anna along with the other women, found themselves in control of the day-to-day running of one of Ireland’s biggest political organisations of the time.

Anna’s story is one that Rebecca Morden of Scary Little Girls Productions has been fascinated with for almost three years now. The result of this fascination is *The Ladies Cage*. The performance aims to resurrect the story of Anna and the Ladies Land League and the company has devoted a large amount of time to detailed research of this period, working closely with historians such as Dr. Margaret Ward, author of *Unmanageable Revolutionaries*. The bulk of this research has now been woven together by Irish playwright Maureen McManus with the Finborough’s own associate director John Terry, stepping in to direct.

The action unfolds in traverse style, enhancing the intimacy of the tiny space. Their story crosses back and forth from London to Ireland and incorporates well-known Irish rebel song and poetry, pushing the plot forward while also representing something many believe to be quintessentially Irish. *The Ladies Cage* attempts to explore not only parts of an almost forgotten period of the Irish Land War but also the repression of women in Irish society during this era. However, the roots of this play are found in a sibling relationship and it’s struggle to remain intact through political and personal turmoil. It is this juxtaposition of the personal and political that creates a meaningful connection.

There are some fine performances from a strong cast of seven. In particular, Lucianne McEvoy approaches the role of Anna with intelligence and sensitivity while Colm Gormley is impressive in his role as the likeable Michael Davitt. Performances are accentuated by simple yet thoughtful set and lighting designs from Cleo Pettitt and Danny Searle and overall, the play is a fine attempt to remember some of Ireland’s lost heroines.

Trying to find accuracy in history however, is like trying to count grains of sand on the seashore. History needs a narrative and the relationship between

language and meaning is a very complicated one. Interpretation of meaning is not rooted in an underlying, definitive structure and attempts to find an accurate representation from past evidence becomes questionable as a result. History is unstable with degrees of stability as neutrality does not exist when writing history. Performing history then, must be considered in a similar context.

Tues-Sat 7.30pm, Sun matinees 3.30pm

Ticket prices: £12, £9 conc

Cast List

Jamie Belton
Colm Gormley
Tracy Kearney
Lucianne McEvoy
Rebecca Mordan
Nathan Rimell
Karen Winchester

<http://www.finboroughtheatre.co.uk/>

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UKTheatre.net

The Ladies Cage
by Maureen McManus

Women have had a secondary role in politics. This is particularly true in the Victorian period when if women had any function at all it was to act as fundraisers and background helpers to the menfolk. So when the men find themselves in prison, the women are suddenly thrust into the limelight.

The setting is Ireland, and the issue is land. There is an agitation to improve the lot of the peasantry. The great famine may have ended but the sceptre of another loomed. Parnell, sometimes referred to as “the uncrowned King of Ireland”, decides to back the campaign, an action which is popular in his home country but to the Westminster government is akin to sedition.

Parnell had two sisters. Anna was a proto-feminist, who believed in votes for women long before the suffragette movement got off the ground. Here is her chance to escape from her “ladies cage” and do something for the good of her people. Women, like all the Irish people, were considered unable to govern themselves, but here she and her fellow campaigners form the Ladies Land League and in doing so show strength of character that puts the men to shame (Parnell comes across as a consummate politician – shrewd but unprincipled).

What follows is a powerful story of female courage and resistance. This play, though of necessity top-heavy in fact, is much more than a history lesson. Seven actors, all of a high calibre, take on many different roles. I will mention Lucianne McEvoy as the indefatigable Anna Parnell, Jamie Belton as a comic RIC sergeant (he can put on a brilliant Cork accent), and Nathan Rimell as a most-plausible Parnell, but all the other performers play their part too. The director, John Terry, must also be commended for the steady pace, inclusion of songs and inventive use of the Finborough Theatre’s space.

A test of whether a play is any good is whether it can sustain the interest after the interval. Here, we become even more engrossed as the story of the Ladies Land League unfolds. I won’t give away the ending but I can say that it is true to the aims of the playwright. Maureen McManus wishes to take women out of the margins of the past and show how their ideas were often so much more enlightened. In doing so, she has written a highly enjoyable drama which can be understood by everyone, whether or not they are familiar with Irish history.

Richard Woulfe

The Irish Post

There is scarcely a major town in the Republic without a Parnell Street. What is being commemorated is the man responsible for one of the biggest “what if’s” in Ireland’s history – what if Parnell hadn’t been toppled by scandal and instead his Irish Parliamentary Party had achieved Home Rule. However, Parnell had two sisters also active in politics and it is these who are commemorated in Maureen McManus’ play *The Ladies Cage*.

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Richard Woulfe

Women and the Irish Land War

By a guest reviewer, in *The News Line* on Wednesday, March 28th, 2007

LATE-19th century Ireland was a hotbed of agrarian revolt but look into the history of what is called the Irish Land War and you'd be hard pressed to find any mention of the role of women in the struggle.

The Scary Little Girl's World Premiere production of *The Ladies Cage* helps put an end to the historical silence with its dramatisation of the founding of the Ladies' Land League and how its members battled to win land rights for poor Irish tenant farmers.

Maureen McManus, playwright, with director John Terry and cast have produced a stirring account of how some dedicated nationalist women sought to give leadership to the anti-landlord movement.

This intriguing political play is ingeniously set up in the intimate space of the Finborough.

We see Anna Parnell, sister of the Irish nationalist leader, Charles Stewart Parnell, develop from his willing helper to become increasingly politicised and an activist in her own right.

She and others in her group refuse to be relegated to a back-seat supportive role. They organise themselves, travelling the country to defend the victims of the rapacious landlords. Anti-eviction protests and rent strikes bring them up against the police and the military.

Movement

The play depicts the parting of the ways between the women's movement and the nationalist leadership as parliamentary manoeuvrings with Gladstone's government demanded moderation.

The Ladies' Land League, directly involved at the sharp end of the struggle, rejected the move for a campaign for rent-reduction and sought to continue their campaign for a militant defence of the poor farmers against injustice and landlordism.

After two government representatives were shot in Dublin the pressure on them not to stir up trouble increased.

To see how the conflict between the two currents, the moderates and the militant women's organization, was resolved, a visit to the Finborough is necessary.

Releasing the ladies from their historical cages

By Bernard Adams in The Irish Times on Tuesday, March 27th, 2007

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 a "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 landlord's 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 sense where a policeman decided the best way to deal with a passively resisting Ladies' Land Leaguer is to propose to her.

Nathan Rimmel 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.

Theatreworld Internet Magazine

Ireland in the early 1880s was on the brink of some great changes: home rule, land reform and the status of women being three profound issues dealt with in this captivating and richly detailed historical play by poet and playwright Maureen McManus. Peopled with randy policemen, charismatic moustachioed politicians, and most of all by spirited women who refuse to be controlled, this play teems with life and vividly demonstrates the warmth of humanity worming itself into the flinty megaliths of politics.

The dashing Nathan Rimell plays Charles Parnell, the leading MP in the Home Rule Party. He has formed an alliance with Colm Gormley's roguish Michael Davitt, a republican who has formed the Land League to help protect tenants from rapacious landlords. But Parnell is arrested after a provocative speech, and Davitt goes off, leaving Parnell's sister Anna to take centre stage in the administration of the Land League.

But never mind home rule, what about votes for women? Or at the very least even a recognition that a woman can be as capable as a man. Charles treats Anna with condescension whilst expecting that she will carry on with the Land League duties, very much a stop-gap in the great man's absence.

Lucianne McEvoy as the focused but deeply passionate Anna carries on her brother's good works, but does so very much in her own way and in spite of his archness towards her, and she founds the Ladies Land League.

Anna is aided and abetted by her band of disparate women, each with their own objectives in life, unusual for the time when normal women all got married and had babies; though they have very much caught the zeitgeist of Emmeline Pankhurst and her sisters. They include the poet Katherine Tynan, and future activist Jennie O'Toole as well as Franny, sister of Anna and Charles, who has gone to America to raise funds.

Director John Terry has taken McManus's lucid, poetic script and created a production that is vibrant, down to earth and yet almost dreamlike in its execution.

Bullying policemen attempt to evict peasant farmers, whilst Parnell postures in Parliament, and a nervous copper would rather propose marriage than forcibly evict one of these scary Ladies Land League women from a church from where she refuses to budge.

It is always inspiring to witness vaguely remembered historical events fleshed out in a performance such as this, and even more so when those with the pivotal roles are the ones whom the history books have ignored, in this case the women.

This is no feminist rant however, merely a belated adjustment - and a further zeitgeist that the play has caught is that of home rule. It is remarkable that whilst this play is being premièred here in London, Ian Paisley and Gerry Adams have finally managed to agree on a devolved government - and both of them are sitting at the same table and smiling! I don't think that has ever happened before.

Reviews by Julia Hickman for Theatreworld Internet Magazine