
Comment - The contraceptive train

By getting on that train a group of brave women made the Catholic Church and the Irish state look ridiculous - Arthur Riordan writes

It was a glorious, mischievous, notorious event. Simply by going on a train journey, a group of brave women made the Catholic Church and the Irish state look ridiculous, and forced the issue of contraception into the public arena for the first time.

Contraception was illegal in Ireland in 1971. Try imagining that.

A whole populace accepted this absurdity as a simple, irrefutable fact of life. Of course many people, in time-honoured Irish fashion, found ways of circumventing the absurdity, like for instance making a quiet shopping trip to Northern Ireland, where contraception was legally available.

Showed the law to be an ass

On 22 May 1971, 47 women very publicly made that trip, bought contraceptives and confronted the customs men in Connolly Station, demanding that they be either allowed through or arrested.

Of course, either course of action would show the law to be an ass.

The story of the contraceptive train struck me as a good subject for a piece of theatre. The event itself had been pure political theatre, and the wider story of the women's movement in Ireland involves a great deal of heroism, and no shortage of comedy.

Furthermore, I reckoned that the best way to address the bizarre, through-the-looking-glass world of Irish society in the early nineteen seventies would be through the form of musical theatre.

I brought the idea to Lynne Parker, Artistic Director of Rough Magic, the company who have commissioned and produced most of my work in the past, and I suggested we might approach Bill Whelan to compose the music.

Matching my words to Bill's music, and vice versa, has been both a joyous and tortuous experience.

His rhythms have an M.C. Escher-like quality to them, their complexity and oddness only becoming apparent when you try to hum along; and some of the beautiful, slower melodies which he's written for The Train carry such emotional weight that I was often faced with the choice of whether to try and match that emotion lyrically, or, more often, to rein in the words and let the music do the work.

Two men writing a musical about feminism?

So how do two men go about writing a musical about feminism? Far too reverentially at first, that's how.

Early songs portrayed the women as admirable paragons, full of idealism, determination, and absolutely no humour whatsoever.

This would do no justice to Nell McCafferty, Marie McMahan, June Levine, Maureen Johnston and the others. This is where Lynne, and Rough Magic's dramaturg, Maureen White, stepped in, constantly prodding us to lose the niceness and make the characters more mischievous, more obstreperous, and more real.

It is hard nowadays to imagine the scale of opprobrium and ridicule they faced. Thomas Ryan, Bishop of Clonfert, said:

“... never before, and certainly not since penal times was the Catholic heritage of Ireland subjected to so many insidious onslaughts on the pretext of conscience, civil rights and women’s liberation.”

Even within the women’s movement, the trip to Belfast caused huge controversy, many seeing it as a sensationalist stunt that would destroy reputations and distract attention from more “serious” issues.

It’s also hard now to think of contraception as a feminist issue. Today, it seems like a basic right, but it’s important for us to remember that back in 1971 the only people with the nerve to stand up for that right were a group of young, smart, bolshie women, who in this production are represented in fictionalised guises by a brilliant cast, accompanied by an extraordinary band (keyboards, accordion, sax, and drums, is that extraordinary enough for you?)

Of course, any piece of theatre sets in the past will inevitably act as a lens through which we can look at the present: it’s easy to laugh at the

absurdities we accepted back then, but how comfortable are we with accepting the Eighth Amendment today?

Now, as then, it would seem our political class is lagging a couple of decades behind the populace.

One of the women who was on the train, Caroline de Costa, has already seen the show and given it the thumbs-up. It was awe-inspiring to meet her. Many more of those women will come and see it in the coming days. I hope they enjoy it, and accept it in the intended spirit: as a tribute to their bravery.

I recently had to go back and check the date: could it really have been? Yes. May 22nd, same date as this year's Marriage Equality Referendum.

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Arthur Riordan is the playwright of the new play *The Train* running as part as Dublin Theatre Festival. [The Train is at Project Arts Centre, Dublin, 6-17 October.](#)

