

PROSCENIUM

Lilies on the Land

By the Lions part

Lilies on the Land

Thursday 30th January to Saturday 1st February 2020
Compass Theatre, Ickenham

Lilies on the Land

The Cast

Margie	Angela Evans
Poppy	Nicola Bielicki
Vera	Linda Hampson
Peggy	Hannah Lester
Other parts played by	Robert Ewen, Anne Gerrard Richard Kessel, Jamie Richards Clare Wooster
Directed by	Neville Price
Stage Manager	Anne Gerrard
Assistant Stage Manager	Clare Wooster David Pearson
Properties	Crystal Anthony
Wardrobe	Toni Price
Sound	Mark Sutherland
Lighting	Paul Davis

The play begins on January 24th 1965.

The action then moves to 1939.

There will be one interval of 15 minutes

Our thanks to Duncan Sykes, Andy of Cycle King,
Richard Kessel, Rene Lester and Jamie Richards.

Thanks also to 'the Lions part' for the genuine WLA uniforms.

A note on the authors – the Lions part

The Lions part is an eclectic company of like-minded professional performers who collaborate to create seasonal festivals, plays and theatre pieces that transform public and community spaces as well as traditional theatres with a fusion of stories, playtexts, music, customs and heritage.

They interviewed over 100 women about their lives in the WLA after placing an advertisement in SAGA magazine. From these interviews they devised and developed 'Lilies on the Land' and toured with it throughout the country on an Arts Council grant. The play finally arrived in the West End of London playing at the Arts Theatre in June 2010.

The characters in the play are an amalgam of several of the women interviewed but are no less real for that.

The play begins on January 24th 1965. The WLA had taken women between 17 and 43 during the war but our cast of characters are quite a bit older now. Something jogs their collective memories on that day, their experiences come flooding back to them and they tell us their story. The story of their hardships, their fun, their disappointments and their loves.

This play is our tribute to the girls and women who helped to keep the country alive during the most dangerous period of our recent history.

We hope you enjoy our own rendition of 'Lilies on the Land', a play about 'The Forgotten Army'.

Neville Price (Director)

The Women's Land Army

In the theatre programme presented by the Arts Theatre, London, where the play was first performed on 8 June, 2010, Emma Butler Smith offers a historical outline of the origin of the Women's Land Army.

It had its roots in the shortages of World War I, when 50 percent of Britain's food was imported. There were serious harvest failures in 1917 and the menace of German naval blockades meant that the country was left with only three weeks' reserve of food. Out of this pressing need for survival, Miss Meriel Talbot and Lady Gertrude Denman, members of the just founded Women's Institute, were appointed to organise the first Women's Land Army (WLA). The response was startling as 23,000 women were admitted into the Army in 1918.

At the outbreak of World War II in 1939, Britain faced an analogous situation. Butler Smith explains in the programme that “Britain was importing about 70 percent of its food but needed to be as self-sufficient as possible” (*Theatre Programme*). Between September 1939 and March 1940, over 30,000 agricultural workers were enlisted in the army, causing an alarming shortfall in farm labourers. Out of this necessity, on June 1st 1939, the second WLA was officially formed. The official minimum age was 17, and women joined for all kinds of reasons – patriotism, to avoid munitions work, to escape home life and for a healthy country life (*Butler Smith*). The women were attracted by alluring recruitment posters that presented an idealised picture of the land and land work, following the slogan “Join the Women’s Land Army. For a healthy, happy job”. However, they mainly found exhausting and demanding hardships, working about 50 hours per week, from dawn to dusk, for about 28 shillings a week (42 pounds today), half of which was normally deducted for board and lodgings, which they had to share with other workers, or with the farmer and his wife. The hygiene conditions were often appalling, and many of them were chronically underfed. “At its peak in 1943, the WLA had nearly 90,000 members and produced two out of every three meals eaten in Britain. Between 1939 and 1950, 250,000 women were members” (*Butler Smith, Programme*). However, the number gradually decreased and the Army was officially disbanded in October 1950...

...the Women’s Land Army had received no post-war pensions or honours, nor at the time were they acknowledged on Remembrance Day. It was not until 2000 that the WLA were invited for the first time by the British government to pay their respects at the Cenotaph, and in 2008, after years of campaigning, the 20,000 surviving members of the WLA were finally awarded commemorative service medals.

*Lilies on the Land – The forgotten Women’s Land
Army of World War II – A documentary play*
Hildegard Klein, University of Malaga, 2010

*“We are land girls, we are land girls,
And we’re proud to do our bit,
Working, hoeing, reaping, sowing,
Just to keep the nation fit.”*

A Land Girl's experience

East End girls

My mother was born and brought up in the East End of London, one of a family of five sisters, one brother and a father. Her mother, my maternal grandmother, had died when they were small children. They lived lives of poverty and deprivation - many children had rickets and every large family had one or two baby siblings in the cemetery...The sons and daughters of working-class families of their generation usually stayed near their parental home and continued to live for most of their lives close to where they were born. That is until the war disrupted the pattern of life for these communities.

My mother and her two sisters (the three youngest of the family) were called up. One opted for munitions factory work, but my mother and her youngest sister chose to join the Land Army.

Country life

This was a marvellous opportunity for young women who had little opportunity to travel, especially town girls who had no experience of country life. My mother had been a dressmaker; she now found herself living in rural Cambridgeshire, working as a farmer, picking fruit and vegetables. The farms in this part of the world were small-holdings - market gardens mainly.

When she speaks of her time on the land my mum's eyes light up. She loved the work, loved the fresh air and the friendship. Twenty or so girls lived in a village called Willingham in a supervised hostel. They were allocated to local farms and, by and large, cycled to work. Not every girl was happy, but my mother speaks with affection about the farming family who owned, or more likely leased, the farm on which she worked.

She remembers picking tomatoes in greenhouses with rain pounding on the glass roof. She was a town girl who made an effortless transition to country life, susceptible to the beauties of nature and the seasons. What a change for a dressmaker who had spent her working life in slum sweatshops!

Romance and dancing

There was a good social life as well. My mum was in her mid-twenties and still single and my aunt a little younger. They would cycle into Cambridge on their days off to go dancing at Dorothy's in the centre of Cambridge. (This is now a multiplex cinema). American and British troops stationed nearby

outnumbered the girls, so there was no lack of attention. My mum and my aunt first tasted peanut butter and bananas at a dance on the American Service base.

The success of the Yanks did not make them popular with the British boys, who couldn't offer such luxuries. Some of the girls went on to new lives in the USA with American husbands. Imagine the shock and excitement of arriving in America after spending life in, say, domestic service in rural England, or doing factory work in urban slums... Those who went into Cambridge by bus often lodged with families in town if they missed the last bus back to the village. In a war society, being invited to sleep overnight with strangers was the way things happened. The hospitality was provided out of sheer generosity of spirit and accepted by the girls in innocence. My mum never spoke of unplanned pregnancies, though I imagine they occurred. The war spirit affected everyone. Lifts were given to any soldier and, of course, to Land Girls. Trucks carrying troops would readily stop for the girls, their bicycles hoisted on board, and friendships struck. Romance readily followed.

Prisoners of war

A prisoner of war camp was sited a few miles out of Cambridge. The Italian troops held there were sent to work on the farms and learned a little English. Their lukewarm commitment to fighting is what my mother remembers most clearly. They had surrendered readily and were biding their time in relatively benign captivity. It is perhaps a tribute to the civilised nature of British society then, that they made no complaints about their treatment. Although my mum can't personally recall any liaisons between Italian prisoners and English girls, they must have happened.

My mother married before the end of the war. Her photograph shows her dressed in a rather splendid smart, short, tailored dress, a lovely violet colour she tells me. The tailored, slightly masculine style, perhaps reflecting the war's demand that women do men's work, was rather flattering. Of course, my mum made the dress herself with whatever materials she could lay her hands on. She left the Land Army before the war ended, when she fell pregnant with my older sister.

***WW2 People's War** is an online archive of wartime memories contributed by members of the public and gathered by the BBC. The archive can be found at bbc.co.uk/ww2peopleswar*

Glossary

The following are briefly mentioned during the play:

Alvar Liddell – BBC newsreader.

John Deere / Fordson – Brand names of American tractors commonly used on British farms in WW2.

D-Day – First day of the allied invasion of Europe 6th June 1944. The D actually just meant day.

Ernie (Ernest) Bevin - Minister for Labour and National Service in Churchill's wartime coalition.

Herbert Morrison – Home Secretary in Churchill's wartime coalition.

John Snagge – BBC newsreader.

NAAFI – Navy, Army and Air Forces Institute (a company created on 9 December 1920 to run recreational establishments needed by the British Armed Forces, and to sell goods to servicemen and their families).

Sir Kingsley Wood – Chancellor of the Exchequer in the wartime coalition (until 1943).

Siren – Civil Defence emergency population air raid warning. After an air raid or should one not happen, an 'all clear' siren would sound.

V1 (Also known as a **Doodlebug**) - A German flying bomb.

VE-Day – Victory in Europe day (May 8th 1945).

Veronica Lake - American stage and film star famous for her peek-a-boo hair style.

WLA – Women's Land Army.

WRNS ("Wrens") – Women's Royal Naval Service (women's branch of the Royal Navy, formed in 1917, disbanded in 1919, revived in 1939).

"...You took up the fight and that was it. We all survived, and I'd do it all again tomorrow"

Molly Stevens, former land girl, Oxfordshire

Our Next Production

The Cherry Orchard

By Anton Chekhov

Widowed landowner Liubov Ranevskya returns to her family estate after five years abroad to face a financial crisis. To pay off mounting debts, she and her brother must sell off their childhood home, including its famous cherry orchard.

Deaf to all practical suggestions, the greatest impediment to finding a solution is their own denial of the need for such drastic action.

With wry humour Chekhov's final masterpiece captures a sense of social change in Russia at the turn of the Twentieth Century

Directed by Ben Morris and Crystal Anthony

April 30th, May 1st 2020, 7:45pm
May 2nd 2020, 2:45pm & 7:45pm

Compass Theatre, Ickenham
Box Office : 01895 250 615

Our final production for 2019/2020

Old-World, by Aleksei Arbuszov, 11th to 13th June 2020

About Proscenium

Proscenium was founded in 1924. Since then, the aim of this experienced group has been to present classic and contemporary plays to as wide an audience as possible. Since 1990, performances have taken place at the Harrow Arts Centre and, more recently, at the Compass Theatre, Ickenham.

The company meets three times a week in Harrow for rehearsals, so that four plays are presented in each season. Social, fund raising activities and play readings take place throughout the year.

Secretary : Ben Morris

Chair : David Pearson

Contact us at www.proscenium.org.uk