

The Elephant Girls

by Margo MacDonald
Parry Riposte Productions



Photo Credit: Andrew Alexander

The Blurb

“Without doubt, they were the most notorious girl gang Britain’s ever seen.”
(Brian McDonald, *The Gangs of London*)

Clever, organized, devious & daring; they stole from the rich and gave to themselves. This is the gripping story of the all-female gang which terrorized London for over 100 years. A fascinating piece of lost women's history, the play focuses on the 1920s when the gang was at the height of its power—and when the events took place which would come to mean its downfall.

“Right here, right now, for one night only, I’ll tell you something special I ain’t never told no one before; I’ll tell you the truth.”
(Maggie Hale, *The Elephant Girls*)

The truth. Told in a pub over a three-night bender by Maggie Hale--the gang's suit-wearing, bloody-knuckled, girl-chasing “enforcer”. She’ll tell you all--who they were, what they did, why it worked, how they got away with it, and how it all came crashing down. But do you trust the words of someone who’s made deception their stock and trade? Should you ask what you really want to know? Just how much are you sure you want to hear?

A story both captivating and repelling, humorous and terrifying. You won’t be able to look away.

The Background

The Forty Elephants, or the Elephant Girls, are an historic all-female gang which operated in London, England from the mid-1800s to about the 1950s. They were brought to light in 2010 by Brian McDonald who included them in his book *The Gangs of London* (and then explored more thoroughly in his 2015 book *Alice Diamond and the Forty Elephants*).

Maggie Hale is both a conflation of several different historic gang members, and also entirely fictional. Unlike many male gangsters of the period, none of these women ever wrote their memoirs, and today any further information regarding these female “enforcers” is lost to time. Using, then, a combination of meticulous research, instinct, and imagination, this is a story both captivating and repelling, humorous and terrifying. It takes the audience on a journey from loving and laughing with Maggie, through surprise and possibly distrust, to complete shock and utter disgust. No audience member will be left unmoved.

The Play

The Elephant Girls is written and performed by Margo MacDonald, and directed by Mary Ellis. Both are highly experienced, multi-disciplinary, professional theatre artists, and multiple award-winners. The show premiered in June of 2015 at the Ottawa Fringe Festival, Canada, where it instantly became a runaway smash hit. In addition to rave reviews, every performance sold out 100% (in fact, it was the first show in the history of the festival to sell-out completely on advance sales alone). The show won all the top Fringe awards (Best of Fest, Outstanding Production, and Critic’s Pick for Best Show). It was then moved into a larger venue and held-over by the Fringe for two additional performances, both of which also sold out.

Since it premiered, the show has been touring to theatres and festivals in Canada and abroad. In July 2016, it played at the Winnipeg Fringe Festival, Canada, where it again sold out 100% and received only 5-star reviews. Most recently, it toured abroad to the month-long Edinburgh Festival Fringe where it was highly well received and picked up for future dates by several presenters, who presented it during our UK and Ireland Spring Tour (April/May 2017).

In Canada, the production swept the 2015 professional theatre awards in Ottawa, Les Prix Rideau Awards, winning Outstanding New Work, Outstanding Direction, and Outstanding Performance - Female. Margo also was awarded Best Actress—Professional by the Capital Critics’ Circle.

Gritty, humorous, moving and edgy, this play consistently holds audiences captivated. It’s the kind of show people line up to see more than once, waiting for hours on the chance of a ticket to the sold-out performances.

This is much more than just a fascinating history; the show raises questions about identity, sexuality, poverty, education, the disenfranchised, the outcast and marginalized, the nature of violence, and more —all of which our society still struggles with today. What is ‘belonging’? What’s the meaning of ‘family’? What price should we be willing to pay for freedom?

This is a story which needs to be told, and one which once heard will not soon be forgotten.

The Bios

Parry Riposte Productions

Parry: 1. to ward off an attack; 2. to deal skilfully with an awkward question
Riposte: 1. to counterattack; 2. a quick retort

Based in Ontario, Canada, Parry Riposte Productions was originally formed to produce an as-yet-unproduced play about a female swordfighter. While still waiting to mount that show, we've been producing whatever else strikes our fancy, with a focus on the inclusion of queer content, as well as creating new work which takes risks and is challenging for the skills and talents of the artists involved.

Parry Riposte Productions has previously produced *Shadows*, a play by Margo MacDonald, which premiered at the Ottawa Fringe Festival in 2010 and was picked up by the Great Canadian Theatre Company to be part of their inaugural *undercurrents: theatre below the mainstream* new works festival in 2011. The production won numerous Fringe Festival and Prix Rideau Awards, and was nominated for several Capital Critics' Circle Awards. It was given a new staging and presented in Toronto, Canada, by Jordan Tannahill and William Ellis as part of Videofag's 2014 season, where it received unanimously rave reviews. In April 2015, *Shadows* toured to London, England where it played for a single performance to a sold-out crowd at the Tea House Theatre, and a private command performance for Looking at You Productions. Wherever it has played, the show has, without exception, been adored by critics and audiences alike.

The company's second production was *Much Ado About Feckin' Pirates!*, an entirely improvised pirate comedy. *Pirates!* was workshopped by Theatre 4.669, then premiered at The Gladstone Theatre in Ottawa, Canada, in 2014. It played on the mainstage at the Toronto Festival of Clowns in 2015, as well as at the *undercurrents: theatre below the mainstream* festival. In 2016, the show was part of SpringWorks Festival in Stratford, Canada. Declared "hilarious" by critics, the show is a fan favourite which will continue to tour.

The Elephant Girls is the company's third production.

Margo MacDonald — Playwright, Performer

Margo is a multi-award winning actor, playwright, and theatre creator. She trained at LAMDA, the University of Ottawa (Canada), and, more recently, as part of the Citadel Theatre/Banff Theatre Centre Professional Theatre Program. Lately she has focused her career on writing and performing her own work. In 2010, she wrote and performed in the completely sold-out smash hit, *Shadows*, (about theatre maverick Eva LeGallienne) which won the Ottawa Fringe Festival Outstanding Overall, Best of Fest, and Fan Favourite awards. It went on to sell out at the *undercurrents: theatre below the mainstream* festival, and has since played to rave reviews at Videofag in Toronto, Canada, and in the UK at the Tea House Theatre in London (2015). She is also the co-creator (with Richard Gélinas) of *Much Ado About Feckin' Pirates!* which played at the Toronto Festival of Clowns last year. Other recent performance credits include: *Pomme & Restes: Shipwrecked!*, *A Midwinter's Dream Tale*, and the title role of *Henry V* (A Company of Fools); *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)* and *Fly Me to the Moon* (Great Canadian

Theatre Company); and *The Penelopiad* (Citadel Theatre). She is a three-time winner of the Prix Rideau Award for Outstanding Performance, and was awarded Best Professional Actress by the Capital Critics Circle for *The Elephant Girls* (2015).

Mary Ellis — Director

Mary has worked extensively as a director, actor and teacher in Ottawa, Canada for many years, and has earned numerous awards and nominations for her work, including a Prix Rideau Award for Outstanding Direction for *The Elephant Girls*. Her other directing credits include Third Wall Theatre's acclaimed production of *Blackbird* (Capital Critics Award for Best Production), George F. Walker's *The End of Civilization*, and Ian Tamblyn's *Bridge to the Past*. Her many acting credits include *Pericles*, *Vanya and Sonia and Masha and Spike*, *God of Carnage*, *The Dumb Waiter*, *Fly Me to the Moon*, *Circle Mirror Transformation*, *Life x 3*, and *Doubt*. Mary teaches at The Acting Company, and at Algonquin College, where she has directed, among others, *Dario Fo's They Won't Pay? We Won't Pay!*, *Chekhov's 33 Swoons*, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, and George F. Walker's *Tough!*.

Other company members include:

Vanessa Imeson - Costume Design

Laura Wheeler - Lighting Design & Stage Management

Laurie Shannon - Stage Management

Andrew Alexander - Poster Design & Promotional Photography

V. West - Associate Producer & Poster Design

Production History

June 2015

- ❖ premiered at the Ottawa Fringe Festival, Ottawa, ON, Canada
- ❖ played to 100% sold-out houses, including an added bonus show
- ❖ won the Outstanding Production, Critics' Pick for Best Show, & Best of Fest awards

July 2015

- ❖ held-over by the Ottawa Fringe for two additional performances, housed in a larger venue
- ❖ played to sold-out houses for both performances

August 2015

- ❖ private showing for the Haunted Walk of Canada tour company managers and staff, Ottawa, ON

September 2015

- ❖ won Outstanding New Work, Outstanding Direction, & Outstanding Performance - Female, Les Prix Rideau Awards (Ottawa's professional theatre awards)

November 2015

- ❖ brought in by the Canterbury High School for the Arts to give a performance and Q&A session to senior Literary Arts and Drama students, Ottawa, ON
- ❖ won the Capital Critics' Circle award for Best Actress

2016

- ❖ Solos Festival, Montreal, QC, April 5
- ❖ Staircase Theatre, Hamilton, ON, May 5-7
- ❖ SpringWorks, Stratford, ON, May 17-22
- ❖ Buddies in Bad Times Theatre, Pride Programming, Toronto, ON, June 30
- ❖ Winnipeg Fringe Festival, Winnipeg, MB, July 13-24
- ❖ Edinburgh Festival Fringe, Edinburgh, Scotland, August 4-28

2017

- ❖ Staircase Theatre, Hamilton, ON, February 4-5
- ❖ undercurrents: theatre below the mainstream festival, Ottawa, ON, February 8-18
- ❖ Wilde Festival, Red Sandcastle Theatre, Toronto, ON, February 22-25
- ❖ Draper Hall, London, England, April 6-22
- ❖ International Dublin Gay Theatre Festival, Ireland, May 8-13
- ❖ Brighton Fringe Festival, England, May 20-26
- ❖ Staircase Theatre, Hamilton Fringe Festival, Hamilton, ON, July 20-30

A Sampling of Reviews

Edinburgh Festival Fringe, Scotland—August 2016

“A gripping, psychological insight into gang life... MacDonald is captivating...*The Elephant Girls* evolves into a deeply psychological struggle between truth and fiction, as Maggie wrestles with the dangerous passion that bubbles beneath her carefully constructed bravado. Complex, subtle, and often deeply uncomfortable, this battle is fascinating to watch.”

—Jordan Shaw, *The List*

**** “As soon as the lights come up, Margo MacDonald captivates, knowing how to keep an audience in the palm of her hand...astonishing.”

—Ashleigh More, *Broadway Baby*

**** “...the attention of the audience never strays and remains ensnared in a captivating story. The play is brilliantly written and exceptionally performed...you will be left wanting to know more. Highly recommended.”

—Fringe Guru

Winnipeg Fringe Festival, Winnipeg, MB, Canada—July 2016

***** “A fascinating story, anchored by one of the finest performances you’ll find at this year’s Fringe. Stampede—do not walk—to *The Elephant Girls*. ... a ferocious, charismatically intense performance.”

—Joff Schmidt, CBC Manitoba

***** “MacDonald is captivating as [her character] Maggie slowly strips away her armour, revealing a history of violence, deprivation and intensely steamy sexual experience...utterly entrancing...”

—Pat St. Germain, Winnipeg Free Press

Ottawa Fringe Festival & Hold-Overs, Ottawa, ON, Canada— June & July 2015

***** “Gritty, powerful, and excellently crafted... an astounding story... we are fortunate to have seen the world premiere of a show that will undoubtedly become a great success.”

—Kat Fournier, Capital Critics’ Circle

“This outstanding solo piece wraps issues of power, class and gender in the story of Maggie Hale...Meticulously researched, lovingly scripted, and directed in economical fashion by Mary Ellis... Outstanding. This is the Fringe at its best.”

—Patrick Langston, Ottawa Citizen

“I guarantee you will not be disappointed. At times the show is hilarious, others heart breaking, and still others so horrific that you don’t want the it to stop because you can’t turn away.”

—Jeremy Dias, Capital Xtra

“Margo MacDonald is a force to be reckoned with... This was truly a performance that made me forget where I was. For that hour, I was in a pub in London, while a terrifying and fascinating woman told me an unforgettable life story.”

—Valerie Cardinal, OnStage Ottawa

“With her sustained working class London accent, her defiant physical stance, her gaze that could destroy innocence and her character’s strong presence...[MacDonald] produces a captivating and at times moving performance.”

—Alvina Ruprecht, Capital Critics’ Circle

“This original show...could possibly become an important text in the Canadian repertoire.”

—Capital Critics’ Circle

“Superb... a riveting hour.”

—John Sekerka, The Revue

Awards

Ottawa Fringe Festival 2015

Winner:

Metro Best of Fest Award

Critics' Pick: Best Show

Outstanding Production

Shortlist:

Critics' Pick: Best Performance

Les Prix Rideau Awards (Ottawa Professional Theatre Awards) 2015

Winner:

Outstanding New Work

Outstanding Direction (Mary Ellis)

Outstanding Performance - Female (Margo MacDonald)

Nominated:

Outstanding Production

Capital Critics' Circle Awards 2015

Winner:

Best Actress - Professional (Margo MacDonald)

International Dublin Gay Theatre Festival 2017

Nominated:

Oscar Wilde Award for Best New Writing

Hamilton Fringe Festival 2017

Winner:

Critic's Choice Award