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# "Signatories" celebrates a defining piece of theatre

April 23, 2016

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Barbara Brennan as Elizabeth Farrell in *Signatories*  
*Ros Kavanagh*

## **Signatories directed by Patrick Mason commissioned by University College Dublin and produced by Verdant Productions**

Rating: ★★★★★

Amidst the thunder of an artillery bombardment, blood stained copies of the Irish Proclamation rain down like a tickertape parade, or like balls of fire flung from cells during a prison protest. Nurse Elizabeth O'Farrell carefully raises her white flag, officially marking the end of the 1916 Easter Rising, with an act of unconditional surrender. Soon the Proclamation's seven signatories, Padraig Pearse, James Connolly, Éamonn Ceannt, Thomas Clarke, Seán Mac Diarmada, Thomas McDonagh and Joseph Mary Plunkett are rounded up and taken to Kilmainham Gaol. There, behind Kilmainham's high walls, all would be executed by firing squad within a fortnight. Beginning

where the Rising ends, Verdant Productions 'Signatories' commissioned by University College Dublin, features eight monologues exploring the personal, private, public and political thoughts of the seven signatories as they await execution, as well as those of Nurse Farrell, for whom none of the bullets were intended. With its stellar cast, Tony Award winning director, site specific opening venue and a collaborative contribution from eight award winning Irish writers, 'Signatories' is undoubtedly one of the most ambitious, powerful and poignant acts of theatre undertaken to commemorate 1916.

This might seem an usual project for UCD to commission, yet UCD played a central role in the emergence of the Irish State. From the culturally driven Gaelic Revival movement to the formation of the Irish Volunteers and Cumann na mBan, from the actual planning of the Easter Rising to the formation of the first Government, UCD lecturers, graduates and even students were all part of the story of Irish independence. A seminal moment in the foundation of the Irish State and often referred to as "the poets' rebellion" among the leaders of the Easter Rising were UCD scholars of English literature, history and Irish.

Along with its historical connection to the events informing 'Signatories,' UCD have also enlisted the literary talents of many of their alumni and lecturers throughout the years in bringing 'Signatories' to life. Indeed, there's an embarrassment of riches on display with Emma Donoghue, Tom Kilroy, Hugo Hamilton, Frank McGuinness, Rachel Fehily, Éilís Ní Dhuibhne, Marina Carr and Joseph O'Connor all bringing their considerable literary weight to bear on this stunning theatrical production.

Over the course of two hours, Yeats' "terrible beauty" is revealed in all its poignant glory. Elizabeth O'Farrell, written by Emma Donoghue and performed by Barbara Brennan, tells a wonderfully nuanced tale of an ordinary woman caught up in extraordinary events. A deeply introspective Pádraig Pearse, written by Thomas Kilroy and performed by Peter Gaynor, sees the soldier poet struggle with faith, death, memory and masculinity. Hugo Hamilton's James Connolly is the stuff of myth and memory, his legend recounted by a modern young woman, deftly portrayed by Lisa Dwyer Gaynor, who also recounts her experiences of a kidnapping in Birmingham. Éamonn Ceannt by Frank McGuinness, performed by Ronan Leahy, toys with coins, asking of the cost, of the role of chance and of what is left behind. A defiant Thomas Clarke, written by Rachel Fehily and performed by Joe Taylor, drops his guard to reveal the family man struggling with no longer being able to support those he loves, lost to him now because of his love for country. Seán Mac Diarmada by Éilís Ní Dhuibhne, sees Mac Diarmada's fiancé Min Ryan, beautifully performed by Roseanna Purcell, recount the humour, banality and humanity of his final days and hours. Humanity is writ large in Thomas MacDonagh, written by Marina Carr and portrayed by Stephen Jones, a man with poetic aspirations and dreams of Paris, bracing himself for death while reassuring his executioners. Finally, there's the principled and passionate Joseph Mary Plunkett, written by Joseph O'Connor and performed by Shane O'Reilly, running out of time to say all he needs to say who, in the face of death, departs declaring, "I am very happy. I am dying for the glory of God. And the honour of Ireland."

Director Patrick Mason emphasises that these monologues are not historical documents, nor acts

of piety, but acts of theatre. A collection of imagined, artistic responses to events and people of the past. If, as Plunkett claims shortly before he leaves the stage, the Rising was itself 'a piece of theatre,' perhaps Ireland's greatest piece of theatre, then 'Signatories' responds with a theatrical production worthy of honouring, interrogating and commemorating that act. One richly informed by Denis Clohessy's haunting music and sound design and Catherine Fay's excellent costumes.

It will be interesting to see how 'Signatories' translates to other venues once it goes on tour and leaves its site specific birthplace of Kilmainham Gaol behind. One suspects it will do incredibly, and deservedly, well. Yet there's something profoundly moving in hearing those eight voices, calling out in the present from the past, in that place that brought seven to their death. Hearing them question, cry, doubt, love and rail defiantly against those dark, high walls with their small cramped cells now silent with shame.

If you can get to 'Signatories' in Kilmainham Gaol, then you should definitely try do so. If not, then catch 'Signatories' on tour. And buy the book. For 'Signatories' is an unforgettable experience and a towering piece of theatre.

'Signatories', commissioned by University College Dublin and produced by Verdant Productions is on tour till May 5th

Kilmainham Gaol, Dublin. Friday 2th to Sunday 24th April at 8.30pm. Tickets €39.05 (booking charges apply) (Non-seated event)

Pavilion Theatre, Dún Laoghaire, Tuesday 26th and Wednesday 27th April at 8.00pm. Tickets €22 and €20

Civic Theatre, Tallaght, Tuesday 3rd and Wednesday 4th May at 8.00pm. Tickets €22 and €20

National Concert Hall, Dublin, Thursday 5th May at 8.00pm

To accompany this landmark production, 'Signatories' which features the story of the seven signatories, plus Nurse Elizabeth O'Farrell's story, as well as an introduction by director Patrick Mason will be published by UCD Press. It will be available at performances, from bookshops nationwide and from [www.ucdpress.ie](http://www.ucdpress.ie) Recommended Retail Price is €20.00

For further information, visit: [www.ucd.ie/centenaries](http://www.ucd.ie/centenaries)



**Chris O'Rourke**

Theatre Examiner

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