

THE CELLS OF ARMAGH

'Irish playwright and mother of four, Margaretta D'Arcy is a political prisoner in a Northern Ireland jail where 'the emaciated bodies of the young women look like pictures of the emaciated victims from Dachau.'

Tish Dace

Margaretta D'Arcy is in prison in Northern Ireland.

In Armagh Gaol, where the Irish playwright, director and actress is serving a three-month sentence for disorderly conduct, beatings are said to be common and the sick are not treated. Instead, illness is reported allowed to progress until the victim is near death. Then she is released — perhaps to save the British government the embarrassment of explaining a stream of coffins emerging from Armagh.

D'Arcy has recently sent details of these and other conditions in this women's prison, which, along with the male H-Block at Long Kesh, houses the political prisoners of Northern Ireland. In a letter to Mary Jane Sullivan of *WIN* magazine, D'Arcy writes of stomach complaints resulting from cells in which "flies and shit and food are mingled together." The floors are "canals of rotting food and urine" and walls, floors and prisoners are "black with flies and bluebottles."

According to D'Arcy, the food is so poor in quality and quantity that radical weight loss occurs among the long-term prisoners, many of whom are women in their late teens and early 20s who are in for 20 years, 30 years or life: "The emaciated bodies of the young women here look like pictures of the emaciated victims from Dachau."

What heinous act landed this mother of four, wife of playwright John (*Sergeant Musgrave's Dance*) Arden and critic for the *New Statesman* in Armagh? D'Arcy was in New York from last February through April rehearsing and performing portions of the D'Arcy/Arden 10-play Irish cycle. She told me the beginning of her story.

D'Arcy is in prison for participating, with approximately 50 women and children from Belfast, in a peaceful demonstration on International Women's Day, March 8, 1979, outside Armagh Gaol over the conditions inside. Since the demonstrators had obtained permission from the police for their picketing, they had little reason to suppose that some of their number would soon be gaining first-hand knowledge of the prison as a result of holding a vigil outside it.

Armed Constabulary

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As D'Arcy described events to me in February, "We were on our way back to our coach after the demonstration when the Royal Ulster Constabulary came along with Land-Rovers and guns, tried to grab a baby in arms and drag it from its mother, took us from behind and drove us to the police station. After five hours they released us. Six months later they served summonses on 11 of us."

What were you protesting?

"You have 40 women in Armagh Gaol who the *Times* just reported are covered with shit. If a young girl is arrested on the morning of her period, she's not allowed to change her sanitary towel for seven days. A woman will be given three vaginal searches in 12 hours, even if she's pregnant. In the jail, vaginal searches are used as a form of torture. Half of the prisoners were convicted on forced confessions. The reason they were arrested at all is because they're Republicans — they live in Catholic areas and want a united Ireland. The court has no jury, and the police don't have to be seen. These women are locked up 24 hours a day in an empty cell.

"So in September we were served with summonses. Our trial date was supposed to be Oct. 8, but we were adjourned to Oct. 25. Then we were adjourned to Oct. 31. On Oct. 31 we turned up in Armagh to be told they'd only booked the court for one day, so we were adjourned again until Jan. 2. When we showed up on Jan. 2 we were told the prosecution barrister was ill and the case was adjourned to April 9. So we said to the magistrate, 'Dismiss the charges or try the case now. We're not coming back.'

"There are 23 charges among the 11 of us. I am charged with disorderly behavior and obstruction."

Were you disorderly and obstructive?

"No. On Oct. 31 the first part of the trial was held, with the inspector. He could give no evidence whatever that we had been either disorderly or obstructive. The police photograph showed that nothing was happening. They had not arrested us while we were supposed to be disorderly or obstructive. He even admitted that we were not disorderly or obstructive while we were standing outside the jail."

Why the Delays?



D'Arcy did not return to Armagh for trial on April 9. It's clear that the authorities — who by then had permitted a demonstration by 500 women on International Women's Day 1980 without making arrests — had delayed the trial to force the women either to change their pleas to guilty or, by failing to show up for trial, forfeit their right to one. D'Arcy was in New York on April 9. When she left at the end of April, she returned to London.

When I phoned John Arden in early June, he gave me the following account: D'Arcy "was found guilty in her absence. Warrants were out for those who hadn't paid their fines on April 9. One woman was already in prison. People had paid the fines for some of the others, and one or two had paid their own fines. Margaretta remained here in London for about a week and then went to Belfast, where she remained for about another week before giving herself up."

D'Arcy turned herself in because she didn't want either the warrant hanging over her or an arrest at some especially inopportune time. She refuses to pay her 40-pound fine (around \$92) because, in Arden's words, "it was levied on her for her exercise of free speech." D'Arcy, in her letter to Sullivan, terms the fine "blackmail." She also acknowledges that a short sentence in Armagh confirmed what she'd heard about conditions there.

Those conditions, D'Arcy told Arden, include the use of male guards for the female inmates and the denial of toilet privileges. Prisoners have chamber pots, but these are left to overflow in the cell or are dumped on the cell floor by guards. With the chamber pots full, the inmates are forced to relieve themselves on the floor. The feces — and indeed the cells themselves — are crawling with maggots.

These and other such details. D'Arcy has learned, were not exaggeration, reports Arden. In short, Armagh Gaol and the male H-Block contain some of the worst prison conditions known anywhere in the world.

A Forum Here

On Saturday, June 21, the New York Smash H-Block Committee, which D'Arcy helped to organize, sponsored a public forum at Washington Square Church to publicize conditions in the Long Kesh H-Block and at Armagh Gaol. Barbara Juppe sang the "H-Block Song," "The Men Behind the Wire" (an oddly sexist but nevertheless rousing number) and a song by D'Arcy herself. Gerry Goley and George McLaughlin described the repression in Northern Ireland and Daniel Berrigan drew parallels to human rights violations in other countries. Reading the names of political prisoners in Northern Ireland consumed a startling amount of time.

The issue of status as a political prisoner is crucial to D'Arcy and to hundreds of others. People like D'Arcy are arrested because their views differ from those of the crown — in direct violation of their civil rights. Others, not so lucky, have been shot down in Northern Ireland for the same "crime."

A hunger strike in 1972 won political prisoners some special rights. In March 1976 these few privileges — permission to wear their own clothes instead of the prison uniform, for instance — were rescinded. Most such prisoners, according to D'Arcy, today go naked, wrapped in a blanket, unwashed, covered with grime and shit.

That this is the condition of Margaretta D'Arcy, my friend and a writer of distinction, outrages me beyond words. But she does not wish to be singled out. If you share my outrage, you can cheer her by sending picture postcards to her at Armagh Gaol, Armagh, Northern Ireland. She would especially like for you to take constructive measures to change British policy by (1) writing to Sir Anthony Parsons, British Consul, British Consulate, 845 Third Av., NYC 10022, to request that political prisoners once more be granted political status, and (2) contacting the Smash H-Block Committee by writing to George McLaughlin at 135 W. 4 St. or calling him at 788-1990.

You don't have to be Irish to weep at the plight of D'Arcy and the others; the committee includes people of a wide spectrum of religious and political beliefs, united solely in their concern over a shocking denial of basic human rights.

In February, when I asked D'Arcy about her future, she left me shuddering. "I have no future," she observed quietly. "My future is tied up with the Irish struggle. If the Irish struggle gets defeated, that is the end of me."