

JAMES JOYCE'S, *THE DEAD*

ACT GEARY THEATRE

10-28-01



"It was always a great affair, the Misses Morkan's annual dance. Everybody who knew them came to it . . ."

Me and the Significant Other scrambled over to Babylon to catch the ACT production (in conjunction with the Huntington Theatre Company from Boston) that won a Tony last year. Now the title *The Dead*, might not fill the uniformed with, well, enthusiasm, but for this old Joycean, who just can never get over having to quake in his boots for three hours before a distinguished panel while discussing the man in the portrait above, I just had to go.

And let me tell you it was worth it, for all the mapcap tearing about town trying to hook up, the careering across the Bay Bridge at eighty miles per hour, the breathless sprint up from the Union Square garage and across the four lanes of Geary Boulevard before galloping up Geary to the Theatre. Only 10 minutes late. But the doorpeople there are the greatest in the world and after the first song, we were seated.

Song? James Joyce? "The Dead?" How could they make a bloody *musical* out of a short story that is not exactly uplifting material? Well, they did and Jimmy, a prizewinning tenor in his day, would have been pleased. Loaded with pieces from contemporary George Moore and filled with exactly the kind of Irish *joi de vivre et musique* that characterized all of his works, from his first book, *Chamber Music*, through "Love's Old Sweet Song" running through *Ulysses*, to the music-saturated *Finnegans Wake*.

From the original short story, but with the full text of what D'arcy was singing added:

"He stood still in the gloom of the hall, trying to catch the air that the voice was singing and gazing up at his wife. There was grace and mystery in her attitude as if she were a symbol of something. He asked himself what is a woman standing on the stairs in the shadow, listening to distant music, a symbol of. . . The song seemed to be in the old Irish tonality . . ."

***If you'll be the Lass of Aughrim
As I am taking you mean to be
Tell me the first token
That passed between you and me.
O don't you remember
That night on yon lean hill
When we both met together
Which I am sorry now to tell.***

*O the rain falls on my yellow locks
and the dew it wets my skin;
My babe lies cold within my arms . . ."*

As fiercely sentimental and great-hearted as the Irish people themselves, the ACT adaptation took a few liberties with the text and meaning, reordering Gretta's remembrance of her long-dead lover to the beginning of the evening when she sees one of Julia's students who reminds her by looks of Micheal Fury. This has her sing Moore's "Golden Wand" in remembrance of the song Micheal used to sing. The suggestion of a failed, or discarded, pregnancy followed by a family removal from the town to the east is supplanted by the poignancy of the remembrance carried throughout a very long evening of painful evocations and her husband's increasing estrangement from her mood. D'Arcy, played by Gannon McHale, sings, instead, quite a lovely aria in Italian to Julia. The subject of his modest offering remains "traure" (sadness).



The spoiled affair for Lily, the housemaid, and what it means for a young woman in 1904 hyper-religious Ireland to go unmarried, is left to odd imprompt

gestures by the actress, backgrounding the action of the principals. Even more subsumed is the reality of the three spinsters, serenaded by "the boys" as "the three graces," but this is not a bad choice to make for the sake of drama. One really nice touch features Aunt Julia confronting the ghost of her youth on her deathbed and singing a poignant duet.

The production shines by far when it celebrates the vigorous joy of life, as in when the entire cast responds to the downstairs neighbor rapping for quiet by performing a shouting, stomping number titled "Wake the Dead!" and in its very topical evocation of miscarried patriotism. Instead of the catlike teasing suggested in Joyce's story, ACT's Brandy Zarle as Molly Ivors shouts and stamps, "West Briton! Why don't you know your own country!" Gabriel Conroy describes the dinner laid out like a military mobilization, and, of course, there are the Joycean references to Parnell, who stood as Ireland's last real chance at intact Home Rule until brought down in a sex scandal that, the circumstances of which, by today's standards, seem rather trivial. Parnell was hounded from office and public life and continually vilified until he died, according to coroners report, of a broken heart.

In 1914, *Dubliners*, containing "the Dead", came out just as World War One began. It was immediately banned in Ireland and America and placed on the Catholic Forbidden List of Banned books. The galleys and the first run plates were destroyed by book burners and the printer was arraigned on charges of printing "pornography". In 1916, the Irish Rebellion was put down when the British brought in cannons and machine guns and virtually destroyed downtown

Dublin. Sixteen of the survivors holed up in the General Post Office were tried for treason, shortly convicted and all hanged to a man -- including the wounded -- shocking even supporters of the English occupation. By 1921, the island erupted into a bloody civil war, the result of which produced the two Irelands we see today. And feelings still run high.

In the grimy old neighborhood haunt called Freight and Salvage, I remember listening to an IRA representative speak beneath the flags of Ireland's 42 counties that hang all about the room. I will remember to this day the man's firm conviction as he said, "We don't want peace. We want justice!"

That was over fifteen years ago and today there is still no more justice than there is peace. In Ireland or anywhere else for that matter. The ACT production is not, however, about defeatist notions that we are all locked into the eternal round-about of Patrick Morkan's horse, for this is drama and drama is the "goat dance" celebrating life after all. It is for this reason that the final tableaux at ACT features Gretta sitting up and taking Gabriel's hand, instead of turning to face the darkness and perpetual evocation of the past. It is possible to be patriotic without violence. It is not necessary to become a one-eyed "Citizen" waving your shillelagh and howling for murder in the pub to love one's country, as the context of the play attests. The entire work is a celebration of a place and its vital timeless qualities without bloodshed. And more for that than any trivial nostalgia and theatrical sentimental did the cast deserve two curtain calls and the standing ovation.

Book by Richard Nelson. Music by Shaun Davey. Directed by Nelson. Jennifer Tipton did lights. David Jenkins, set design. Sean Cullen and Kate Kearney-Patch portray the married Conroys, who the SF Chronicle reported "anchored a strong ensemble" with "luminously expressive, aching controlled performances".

Miss Julia Morkan played by Alice Cannon, and her sister, Kate, by Patricia Kilgarriff. Their self-effacing niece, Mary Jane, perfectly done by Jennifer Piech. Brandy Zarle portrayed the mischievously self-righteous Irish nationalist, Molly Ivors, who gets into a spat with Gabriel Conroy.

The assembled guests and music students attending as guests to the holiday affair are beautifully portrayed by a strong cast, with Shay Duffin as a gentlemanly rogue, Paul Anthony McGrane as a good-natured drunk and Paddy Croft as his disapproving mother. The sweetly rendered songs (musical direction by Deborah Abramson) -- with lyrics by Nelson and Davey, some adapted from Joyce's poetry -- segue from performance pieces to Gabriel and Gretta's thoughts as lively jigs (choreography by Sean Curran) punctuate the action.

"The time had come for him to set out on his journey westward. Yes, the newspapers were right: snow was general all over Ireland. . . . His soul swooned slowly as he heard the snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead."

