

## THEATER REVIEW

*James Joyce's "The Dead."* By Richard Nelson and Shaun Davey. Ahmanson Theatre, Los Angeles, California. 24 August 2000.

1. Attending a performance entitled *James Joyce's The Dead* carries with it certain associations and expectations. This review will reflect upon *James Joyce's The Dead* as a literary adaptation, examining the ways in which the musical uses Joyce's text, "The Dead," a short story in *Dubliners*, for its script. To be honest, loyal Joyceans will most likely find the show disappointing. The creators of the musical took many liberties with Joyce's work, and in the opinion of this reviewer, the end-result is dissatisfying. This pronouncement is not a point-blank condemnation of the show. On the contrary, the musical provided an evening of entertainment, but ultimately, *James Joyce's The Dead* contains little James Joyce and audience members expecting more will likely leave the theatre unfulfilled.
2. For many people, the title "The Dead" immediately conjures up images of corpses and graveyards. One might expect the storyline to be depressing, if not downright morbid. The subject matter might strike many potential audience members as an odd choice for a Broadway musical. Moreover, the music typically associated with death: dirges, funeral marches, and songs of mourning, seem much more appropriate for somber postures and weeping faces than for the lively singing and dancing most audiences have come to associate with stage musicals.
3. Of course, anyone who has read James Joyce's short story "The Dead," the work on which the musical is based, knows that Joyce does his best to present his audience with a joyous, genial occasion, but careful readers might notice that the occasion is not as warm and inviting as it appears. Through several finely nuanced descriptions and bits of dialogue, the author undercuts the celebratory nature of the evening: Gretta Conroy looks "perished alive" and all evening her husband Gabriel had "a gloom cast over him." (Gretta and Gabriel pictured) He lacks any semblance of spontaneity, quoting himself in the after-dinner toast and later in the evening when he considers professing his love for his wife. Even such "moments of ecstasy" as this lack all enthusiasm and exhilaration. In fact, the only character who seems to have been able to sustain any semblance of passion or feeling is the one character in the story who is already dead, Michael Furey.

4. By obscuring the boundaries that separate life and death, Joyce ultimately criticizes those whose lives are devoid of intimacy, emotional connection, and passion. The title "The Dead" not only refers to the already deceased Furey, but also to all of the living characters in the story who have allowed themselves to become content with a dull, repetitive day-to-day existence. There is no magic, no spark, nothing at all to motivate anyone to take a risk, or break out of their humdrum routine. Such a lack of interest and vitality dooms these characters to lives that are not really life at all. Underneath the Aunts' apparently convivial, joyous feast, there is a deeply ironic subtext which suggests that once people reach a certain point in their lives, everyday existence becomes routine and regimented. For Joyce, there seems to be no viable alternative to such a dreary fate whether we, like Gretta Conroy, fantasize and mourn for what could have been, or we long to lose ourselves in the pure oblivion of the snow, like her husband Gabriel.
5. The musical version of "The Dead" fails to capture this tragic message or convey the subtle melancholic undertones that permeate Joyce's work. The relationship between Gabriel and Gretta is one of the most problematic aspects of the show. On stage, the couple is very affectionate and loving. They hold hands, share private moments and even sing a happy duet together. For his part, Joyce certainly wanted to create the outward appearance of a happily married couple, but for most of the story Gretta does not play a prominent role and Gabriel is preoccupied with other things. There is a sense of distance and remoteness in this relationship underneath the Conroys' affection that the musical does not communicate. To be fair, I certainly liked the relationship on stage much more than the one in the pages of "The Dead." It is much closer to the kind of harmonious marriage most playgoers would like to observe, but it does not offer an accurate depiction of the Conroys' relationship as Joyce represented it.
6. Another problem with the musical is the happy, upbeat nature of the dinner party. As noted, although this feast was intended to be a festive occasion, the author presents us with numerous suggestions to the contrary to undercut this celebration. The stage version of the dinner is lively and all of the guests seem in high spirits. There is no hint of anything wrong—even the disagreement between Gabriel Conroy and Molly Ivors over Irish politics is downplayed as Miss Ivors (unlike in the story) does not leave the party after dinner. She and Conroy even seem to reconcile their differences. Furthermore, the show's

creators/adaptors pull their trump card far too early in the show; in effect, they force the viewers to read the last page of the book first. By revealing that Gretta is pining away for another man at the end of Act I, they rob the final scene of its dramatic impact and significance.

7. In the show's defense, the Artistic Director/Producer of the Los Angeles Center Theatre Group claims that the creators of this show have "ignored nearly every rite of musical theatre" because they employ "song and dance to darken the evening and sharpen the ache of loss" (Program, P-2). Despite these intentions, the evening does not seem dark or melancholy. The guests all sing cheerful songs, the dancing is jubilant, and the dinner is full of mirth. Gretta's solo is one of few exceptions, as is Gabriel's nod to those no longer present from dinner parties past.
8. The final exception is elderly Aunt Julia's song "When Lovely Lady." Her unhappiness, however, stems from the musical's claim that she has lost her voice in her old age. Part of the problem here is that the actress who portrayed Julia in the Los Angeles production was a strong singer. Moreover, in his text, Joyce tells us that Julia's voice is "strong and clear in tone." In the story, Julia's unhappiness comes not from the deterioration of her voice, but from the song the elderly spinster chooses to sing, "Arrayed for the Bridal." By changing the song Julia sings from the bridal melody to "When Lovely Lady," the show's creators distort the nature of her sorrow and detract from the scene's poignancy and its ironic undertones.
9. *James Joyce's The Dead* contains many other revisions. Some modifications, such as the addition of song and dance seem benign. Other changes, such as the added deathbed scene near the musical's conclusion, are heavy-handed and effectively destroy the delicate web of subtlety that Joyce labored to create. The story aims at confusing the differences between life and death. To append an actual death destroys any vagueness and could not make the distinctions clearer.
10. The production seems a bit overdone from the cheerful songs before dinner, to the thunderous chorus of the finale. The ending of the story should be a poignant, intimate moment: Gabriel has learned that his wife has loved another man. When the story closes, the snow has started to fall again outside the window, and we leave Gabriel ruminating over his marriage, life, and death. In the musical, it is at this point that the music swells and the entire cast rejoins the Conroys onstage to sing a rousing finale, spoiling the intimacy of the whole

scene. Gretta awakens, and she and her husband share a moving embrace. In the show's defense, perhaps Gretta and Gabriel's final reconciliation is added to make the show a guaranteed crowd-pleaser, and from my experience, it worked. If this tendency toward exaggeration is par for the course in stage musicals, then perhaps the piece was ill-conceived from its inception, at least from a literary perspective.

11. This review has been perhaps too harsh, for the evening was an enjoyable one, and the audience, to judge from their applause and standing ovation, was quite satisfied with the experience. The problem lies in calling the musical *James Joyce's The Dead*. This title implies a definite fidelity to Joyce and his text. This musical, as I have tried to demonstrate, took great liberties with "The Dead." Instead of acknowledging the striking differences in their finished product, they encourage audiences to equate this show with the original story. This show is not James Joyce's "The Dead." It is a separate and independent creation. As such, it has its own merits, but from the literary perspective, it must, unfortunately, come up short.

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