

Theater Reviews

8:00 PM PST 2/11/2008 by Jay Reiner , AP

James Joyce's The Dead

Open Fist Theatre Company, Hollywood
Through March 22

What could be simpler? A cheerful party spent among family and friends, a finely set table laden with good food and drink, traditional Irish song and dance to charm the devil, and outside a snowy evening to blanket the merriment.

This is the setting for James Joyce's moving short story "The Dead," which in 1999 was turned into an equally moving play with music by Richard Nelson, who wrote the lyrics, and Shaun Davey, who wrote the music. Admirers of the story will find that Joyce's lyrical writing and the poignancy of his characters transfers nicely to the stage. The lure of bringing this little masterpiece to life in another medium was strong enough to prompt John Huston to make it his final film.

So little seems to happen and yet so much is suggested; this is one source of the tale's fascination. Most of the piece is devoted to the animal high spirits and tiny crosscurrents of affection and conflict common to gatherings of intimates. But at the end of the party and in the following scene, Gabriel Conroy (Rob Nagle), a teacher with literary aspirations, comes to learn something disturbing about his adored wife Gretta (Martha Demson in the role played by Anjelica Huston in the film) that he never suspected and which will probably change him forever. It's a moving epiphany, finely realized by Nagle in the play's closing moments.

Part of the charm of the piece is that you can skate its pleasing surface or enter into the tantalizing subtext that beckons just below. Joyce was a voluntary exile from the provincialism and political turmoil of Ireland, and this tore at him the rest of his life. These conflicted feelings are submerged in the tender story that unfolds, bobbing to the surface from time to time and lending the tale a haunted quality that lingers after the close.

Charles Otte directs with a sensitive feel for these nuances, and the cast reflects this in their warm affection for the characters. Nagle's low-key performance is filled with a passionate undercurrent that defines the character well. Demson, in a quiet way, allows us to see what her husband sees in her and why he might be shattered by what he learns.

Judith Scarpone and Jacque Lynn Colton (doing some of her best work ever on a Los Angeles stage) capture the distinctive flavor of the two aunts hosting the party, one tart and smart, the other a sweet soul clinging tenaciously to what little life remains. Sarah Buster is splendid as sharp-tongued Molly Ivors (who stays around much longer than in the short story). Teresa Willis, Michael Franco, Bruce Dickinson, Arthur Hanket, Kendra Chell and Nicola Hersh all lend strong support. The Irish accents are quite well done, a tribute to dialect coach Sandi Massie.

The three musicians -- Dean Mora, Jennifer Richardson and Otte -- add much pleasure to the evening, from the opening strains of the scratchy violin to the last somber sounds of the mournful cello.