

THEATER BEAT

Endearing and emotional 'Dead'

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Intimate nuances carry "James Joyce's The Dead" at Open Fist Theatre Company. By returning Richard Nelson and Shaun Davey's delicate 2000 musical based on James Joyce's elegiac short story to its chamber origins, director-designer Charles Otte achieves a piercing immediacy.

A succes d'estime on Broadway and at the Ahmanson Theatre, "The Dead" largely adheres to Joyce's final "Dubliners" entry. As guests arrive behind the scrim that swathes designer Kis Knekt's set, Gabriel Conroy (Rob Nagle) recalls the annual Yuletide party hosted by his aunts, Julia and Kate Morkan (Jacque Lynn Colton and Judith Scarpone), and their niece, Mary Jane (Teresa Willis). Nelson's Tony-winning libretto offers an eavesdropper's perspective, driven by Davey's evocative songs. The good-humored naturalism telescopes into existential poetry after the party, when Gretta (Martha Demson), Gabriel's wife, shares a long-held secret that shatters his reality.

In tandem with fine designers, Otte stages this ephemeral material to a fare-thee-well, playing the violin in musical director Dean Mora's combo himself, and his remarkable cast follows suit. Jake Wesley Stewart's music student, Sarah Buster's political renegade, and Michael Franco and Nicola Hersh as drunken Freddy Malins and his formidable mum typify the general spontaneity, which peaks at the group dance to "Naughty Girls."

Few are trained singers, though, so prepare accordingly. Colton captures the affecting moment when Julia's voice falters midparlor song and Scarpone's pert Kate joins in to cover. Conversely, the penultimate duet between Julia and her younger self (Amy Tzagournis) cannot quite erase memories of originator Sally Ann Howes.

Similarly, Nagle's touching Gabriel and Demson's sensitive Gretta require forbearance at the finale, where their exposed feelings distort intonation in favor of emotional heft. It isn't snow falling softly at the end of this heartfelt revival but bittersweet Joycean tears.

-- David C. Nichols

"James Joyce's The Dead," Open Fist Theatre Company, 6209 Santa Monica Blvd., Hollywood. 8 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays, 3 p.m. Sundays. Ends March 22. \$25. (323) 882-6912. Running time: 1 hour, 35 minutes.