

James Joyce's The Dead

Open Fist Theatre Company at
Greenway Court Theatre

Reviewed by Bob Verini



The cast

Photo by Eric Neil Gutierrez

For this chamber musical, Shaun Davey and Richard Nelson have crafted Irish faux folk tunes that rely more on vocal brio than beauty. And let's face it, the characters' increasing insobriety lowers the bar on singing quality as the play's Christmastime celebration progresses. But the adaptation of James Joyce's brilliant, deep novella—possibly the best of its kind in the English language—is a bitch to stage, with its tonal shifts, huge cast, multiple settings, and thematic ambiguities.

Open Fist Theatre Company has brought back this production from several years ago with multiple cast changes, new costumes, and directorial consultation (credited to Charles Otte), which make for an uneven but earnest and moving show. Best of all is Rob Nagle, whose tenures as a staple of Antaeus and Troubadour theater companies didn't prepare me for the simplicity and sheer rightness of his Gabriel Conroy, who must function as narrator, emcee, party host, and emotional victim before the 90-minute drama is through. Nagle brings nuance and weight to a character that in other hands might be a bland Everyman.

The cast is certainly game; many of its thesps are quite gifted, and no one is an out-and-out weak link, which with this many folks around is damned good. But it must be said that they never quite gel and meld into a true ensemble. We don't get the sense of a party shifting—as parties in real life do—from early enthusiasm to drunken glee to melancholy and back again; there's a sameness to the dynamic at Greenway Court that is palpable, even at such a brief length.

But complaints aside, it's worth seeing, particularly for fans of musical theater.

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Jan 18-Feb. 22. 544 N. Fairfax Blvd. (Free parking adjacent to the theater.) Fri-Sat 8pm, Sun 7pm. \$25. (323) 882-6912.