

BWW Reviews: Open Fist Theatre Company's Must-See Musical, James Joyce's THE DEAD

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by Ellen Dostal



(Eden Livingood on violin, Jennifer Richardson on cello, and Kelly De Sarla on flute), playing in the parlor onstage. It is the parlor of the Missus Morkans and it will soon be filled with family and friends as they celebrate the Feast of the Epiphany during their annual Christmas party. Time and place: Dublin, near the turn of the century.

What is most appealing about the cast is that this group of actors doesn't feel like actors playing members of an extended family, they actually feel like a family. Sit close, if you can, to fully experience the intimacy of the moments. Their silent asides and subtle glances reveal so much more about the characters than what they say out loud and the way they are staged capitalizes on the ambience of the Greenway Court's elegant theater, accenting the nostalgic mood of the piece.

You also want to sit close to fully appreciate **Rob Nagle's** magnificent narration. He has a gift for making you feel like you're the only person in the room when he speaks to the audience and his soul-searching honesty reveals a poignant self-awareness of his character's shortcomings perplexed by a world that, to him, lacks the respect of days gone by. His beautiful speech searching for "the words that can express one's heart" also reveals a reticence in communication that, often repeated, has now become habit, and by this stage in his marriage is a pattern too confounding to change.

Not that his wife Gretta (Martha Demson) hasn't realized it. The secret she reveals this night is not what Gabriel would have anticipated and, like the passing of the torch within the hierarchy of the family, its impact will surely be felt in the days and years to come. A luminous Demson, who is also Open Fist's artistic director, moves through the play with the grace of a woman who knows and accepts the picture of her life yet, when prompted by a song from the past, cannot forget the pain of younger days.

The party is a microcosm of life; tensions rise, missteps are made, and yet there is joy threaded through every fiber of this quiet, careful portrait. Infectious laughter ripples through the room as guests take their turn gifting the others with a song or a dance. Niece Mary Jane (Melissa Sullivan) and Michael (Devon Armstrong) sing a charming ode to "Kate Kearney" while already inebriated guest Freddy (John LeMay) makes a splash with his jaunty pub song. Later, he and the ensemble stomp to "Wake the Dead," much to the annoyance of the downstairs neighbor. Gretta's haunting "Goldenhair" is the catalyst for Gabriel's epiphany to come and the two also sing a poignant "Adieu to Ballyshannon."

Each in his turn offers the gift of a song, always sung from the heart, and none more touching than "When Lovely

When a show moves me like this one did, it's worth raving about. Minus the bombardment of glitz and flash so often shoe-horned into modern day musicals, the remount of Open Fist Theatre Company's **James Joyce's** THE DEAD is instead that rare production that breathes life into our hearts with its singular connection to our humanity. By revealing the flaws in our perception of the world around us, it finds the beauty in the ordinary and elevates it to something fine. For that reason, it is my first must-see musical of 2014.

Before it even begins, the quaint old-fashioned tone is set by musical director **Dean Mora** (on piano) and his musicians

Lady Stoops to Folly," sweetly tendered by the elderly Aunt Julia ([Jacque Lynn Colton](#)). Though her wandering mind can no longer hold the lyric, it is clear that she is a woman well-loved by her family and Colton is enchanting in the role.

THE DEAD (book by [Richard Nelson](#), lyrics by Nelson and [Shaun Davey](#), and music by Davey) is based on [James Joyce](#)'s final novella in "The Dubliners," a compilation of short stories about the Irish middle class, written at the turn of the century when Ireland was at a crossroads and nationalism ran high. As such, an undercurrent of restlessness is evident beneath the surface of Joyce's work. Nothing is ever as simple as it seems and no one will be more conscious of that fact than Gabriel by the evening's end.

Kris Knekt's tastefully appointed scenic design and Dan Reed's subtle lighting create a comforting backdrop for the rich reds and earthy tones of [A. Jeffrey Schoenberg](#)'s period costumes and [Bruce Dickinson](#) & Ina Shumaker's heirloom furnishings are a functional mix. When combined, these elements create a necessary normalcy that promises, however fleeting, to be a respite from the chilling winter wind outdoors and the unavoidable changes that loom ahead.

Open Fist may be wandering in search of a permanent theater to call home but that has not stopped them from giving audiences a beautiful production in the interim. A finer evening of theatre you will not find in Los Angeles. The delicacy of the storytelling and profound simplicity of the words leave a lasting impression, one that should be experienced.

ABOUT AUTHOR ELLEN DOSTAL



In addition to being part of the west coast Broadway World team, Ellen also publishes two popular Southern California Theatre Blogs - [Musicals in LA](#) and [Shakespeare in LA](#). An actress, singer and voiceover artist, she is also a producer with the Academy for New Musical Theatre, and works with the development of new musicals across the country.