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James Joyce "The Dead"

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Contributor

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The cast (Rob Nagle, far left) of Open Fist Theatre Company's production of James Joyce's "The Dead" at the Greenway Court Theatre (Source:Eric Neil Gutierrez)

Many people are unfamiliar with the author James Joyce, and the few who do know of him probably can't tell you what he is known for. A pat on the back for those who have read snippets of his most famous work "Dubliners," but that is usually where the connection stops. I am one of the those guilty ones, but I can say that I definitely remember reading his short story "**The Dead**" in college and finding it to be beautiful and haunting.

When I learned that not only was there a live production of the tale opening in town, but also that it was a musical, my curiosity was piqued, to say the least. I haven't read the story in almost a decade, but I do remember the way it made me feel: sad and hopeless, yet inspired at the same time. Did this rendition of Joyce's tale invoke the same feelings?

Not quite... but pretty close to it.

Richard Nelson and Shaun Davey are responsible for the music and script, and along with choreographer Christine Sang have created a fantastic production. It does, however, lack some of the utter sorrow and pain that has made the original work memorable to me after all these years. Their livelier numbers and light-footed dance moves at times made me almost forget the cloud of sorrow looming over the guests.

The setting is Ireland in 1904, just after Christmas, at the Morkan's holiday party. The two aunts and their niece have made the gathering an annual event, and among the guests is Gabriel Conroy, our protagonist, and a handful of friends and family. It is an exceptionally cold winter night with plenty of snow falling, but inside the Morkan household there is warmth and mirth. By the end of the bustling evening Gabriel finds out an unsettling secret about his wife, which leads to an even greater realization about himself.

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I was surprised (and somewhat relieved) to see that the awkward dinner party has not changed much with the decades. With "The Dead" you will find the guy who drank too much, the girl who thinks she's too good to be there, the guy who is trying to get everybody drunk, the uncomfortable

and the overly confident. They are all on stage together and what ensues is a production that will make you laugh, and -- staying true to the original story -- will also probably make you cry.

Gabriel, a self-conscious and sad writer, spends a large portion of the night worrying about his dinner toast. Rob Nagle does an excellent job of expressing the hopelessness woven into every word of the story through his portrayal of Gabriel. When he speaks, you want to listen, when he sings you are captivated, and when he hurts you want to comfort him. Bravo to Nagle for breathing life into this character.

Martha Demson plays Gabriel's wife Gretta, whose painstaking revelation at the end is sung beautifully and with such raw emotion it filled the room with an impenetrable sadness. You see the joyful mask she has worn throughout the show slowly melt away into a puddle of tears shaken by her sobs. She was simply a delight to watch.

Hats off to the costume designer and team for making the cast appear so time period appropriate, Jeffrey Schoenberg and Joe DiMaggio transported them all to the Ireland in the early 1900's. The overall look, plus the Irish dialect (with the help of Tuffet Schmelze) was spot on and after a while I felt like I was a part of the small dinner party.

This emotionally complex production is a must see -- even if you have never heard of James Joyce; and for those who have it offers a fresh and lively twist to the original dismal tale. The music is great, the dancing is delightful and overall everything is both uplifting and daunting; just the way the author intended.

"The Dead" runs through Feb. 22 at Greenway Court Theatre, 544 North Fairfax Ave., in Hollywood. For tickets and information, call 323-882-6912 or visit www.openfist.org or www.greenwayarts.org