

Enjoy the Subtle Charms of 'The Dead'

Posted on February 3, 2014 by Christopher Cappiello



As they begin a nomadic season after losing their Hollywood home, the award-winning Open Fist Theatre Company revives a 2008 production of *The Dead*, playwright Richard Nelson and composer Shaun Davey's Tony-nominated adaptation of the beloved James Joyce short story that ends his classic *Dubliners* collection. For those like myself who missed it the first time around, this handsome and haunting remount at the comfortable Greenway Court is a welcome chance to enjoy the subtle charms of an exquisite chamber piece.

Joyce's tale is set at the annual holiday party hosted by the Morkan ladies—aging aunts Julia (Jacque Lynn Colton) and Kate (Judith Scarpone) and their unmarried niece Mary Jane (Melissa Sullivan)—at their Dublin home on the Feast of the Epiphany in early 1904. All three women are music teachers, and songs are easily absorbed into the story, often by characters performing for each other as part of the evening's festivities. Nelson and Davey's lilting, melodic score cleverly borrows from traditional Irish songs, popular poems, and even Joyce's own writing to add grace notes of sorrow, joy, hope and celebration to the proceedings.

Our narrator is Gabriel Conroy (Rob Nagle), nephew to Julia and Kate, who sets the scene for us, pulling aside a translucent scrim to reveal Kis Knekt's cozy, period-perfect set before arriving with his lovely wife Gretta (Martha Demson). The events of *The Dead* are subtle. There are no falling chandeliers or ascending green witches. But lives are nonetheless irreparably altered by the snowbound evening's revelations.

An onstage ensemble of musicians (directed by pianist Dean Mora) provides gorgeous support to a cast with mixed vocal talent; however, the sometimes shaky voices work for a piece about regular folks gathering for song, drink and dinner. Charles Otte's original direction is revived, using the wide Greenway stage to great effect, allowing the activity to unfold naturally, sometimes simultaneously, like a well-constructed music box. You can practically smell the damp wool in A. Jeffrey Schoenberg's sumptuous costumes, complemented by Dan Reed's moody lights and Joe DiMaggio's wigs.

Colton is touching as the ailing Julia, and Sullivan subtly conveys a tender heartache in the spinster niece. John LeMay overplays his character's drunkenness at times, even as Nicola Hersh delights as his disapproving mother. The journey of the piece belongs to Gabriel, however, and Nagle charts it with grace and quiet devastation. The final scene in Joyce's short story offers some of the most gorgeous imagery in 20th-century literature, much of which Nelson and Davey transplant into the lyrics of the closing number. As Nagle so tenderly delivers them—eventually joined by the whole company—one feels the weight of time, the ache of love, the chill of the snow and, yes, the pull of the dead.

Greenway Court Theatre | 544 N. Fairfax, L.A.

Through Feb. 22 | [openfist.org \(http://www.openfist.org\)](http://www.openfist.org)