



CULTURE MONSTER
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Review: 'The Dead' at the Greenway Court Theatre



Rob Nagle, left, Martha Demson and the cast of "The Dead" at the Greenway Court Theatre. (Eric Neil Gutierrez / January 23, 2014)

By F. Kathleen Foley
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Although critically acclaimed, "The Dead," based on James Joyce's final offering from his short-story collection, "Dubliners," ran for just 120 performances on Broadway in 2000. That a musical so bravely unassuming should have gotten to Broadway at all is a marvel. Yet this charming chamber piece contains quiet virtues too seldom on display in the commercial theater.

Now at the Greenway Court Theatre — a remounting of an

Open Fist Theatre production from several years back — this “Dead” has obvious flaws, including the cast’s singing voices, which can be described only as modest, and some wildly errant Irish accents that come and go. Yet in Charles Otte’s original staging, those quiet virtues remain much in evidence.

As for the imperfect vocalizing, it seems oddly apt for this impromptu Christmas musicale at the home of the beloved Misses Morkan (Jacque Lynn Colton and Judith Scarpone). Musical director Dean Mora, who leads the onstage musicians, certainly gets the most from his performers, while choreographer Christine Sang contributes lively dances very much in the Irish tradition.

The songs sound traditionally Irish but are original to the piece. Richard Nelson and Shaun Davey, who wrote the book and music, respectively, and collaborated on the lyrics, preserve the essence of their source material (although one wishes that they hadn’t altered Joyce’s perfect final paragraph into a etiolated closing “number”).

Rob Nagle masterfully spearheads the ensemble as narrator-protagonist Gabriel, whose complacency is about to be painfully punctured. Radiant Martha Demson, as Gabriel’s wife, Gretta, shows unrelenting grief under her outwardly perfect facade.

As for the rest of the cast, they are convincingly just friends and relatives gathered for punch-fueled fun while a snowstorm rages outside. The atmosphere is cozy, the company congenial, and we feel privileged to have been invited.

“The Dead,” Greenway Court Theatre, 544 N. Fairfax, Los Angeles. 8 p.m. Fridays-Saturdays, 7 p.m. Sundays. Ends Feb. 22. \$25. www.openfist.org. Running time: 1 hour, 40 minutes.