

SNOW FALLING ON DUBLINERS

University Theatre takes on a musical adaptation of James Joyce's "The Dead"

As the stage faded to black on the final scene of University Theatre's current production of *The Dead*, and the cast finished belting out a musicalized version of what might be the finest closing paragraph in all of English fiction, I suddenly found myself clutching my head with both hands. Yes, I tend to overreact. I take no pleasure in relating this, but it must be done.

Make no mistake: Technically speaking, UT's musical adaptation of James Joyce's short-story masterpiece is top-notch (save for that primary spotlight that shot spasmodically here and there across the stage like a toddler trying to catch a cat). The cast is strong and well-voiced, and the sets, the live music, the choreography — it all gelled together excellently to evoke that combination of melancholy, nostalgia and cosmopolitan fracturing that makes *Dubliners*, the collection of which this story is the high-water mark, a sacred secular text, not just of modernism but of literature itself.

Boiled down to its barest truths, Joyce's story is about a moment of revelation that sweeps over poor Gabriel Conroy, a somewhat pompous and self-obsessed but essentially decent man, a writer, who suddenly realizes that the greatest love in his wife Gretta's life is not for him but for a frail young boy who long ago died for love of her. This moment — one of Joyce's famous "epiphanies" — arrives at the end of an annual holiday feast which gathers together some of the finest patrons of Ireland's middle classes.

Directed by Michael Malek Najjar, an assistant professor of theater arts at UO, the production — based on the Broadway musical by Richard Nelson and Shaun Davey — does a credible job reproducing the humid, claustrophobic bustle of Joyce's holiday festivities, with its pet-

ALEX MENTZEL AND KELSEY TIDBALL IN UNIVERSITY THEATRE'S *THE DEAD*



ty rivalries, ancestral allegiances and Yuletide bonhomie. Too much of the first act is taken up by musical numbers, and in general the play runs much longer than it needs to, though all in all it's a pleasant experience living vicariously through this Irish bourgeoisie collected together at the dawn of the 20th century.

As Gabriel and Gretta, Alex Mentzel and Kelsey Tidball are wonderful; they very much carry the play, though the rest of the cast, too vast to list here, provide strong support in various classic character sketches (the nativist journalist, the rollicking drunk, the ailing elderly hosts, the boisterous bigmouth, etc.). The idea of turning Joyce's prose into lyrics is questionable (*Yes Yes Molly Bloom: The Musical!*), but, granting that, it all comes off reasonably well.

But in the service of what? In Joyce's "The Dead," Ga-

briel's moment of reckoning, as he stands at a window with his wife weeping in bed, is rendered with exquisite and tender quietude — the internal journey of one man's sad, cosmic acceptance of time and mortality, leading to such devastatingly beautiful lines as this: "His soul swooned slowly as he heard the snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead."

In UT's musical, Gabriel's interior musings are made painfully external, as he sings the words and is eventually joined by the rest of the cast in a sort of rousing, "we're-all-in-this-together" chorus of dubious uplift. This gesture mistakes individual acceptance for universal consensus, and completely undermines and invalidates the emotional impact of Joyce's story. The whole thing verges on satire — maybe not on the level of The Simpson's *Planet of the Apes: The Musical*, but still ...

Such tone-deafness to the valences and rhythms of art is not an accident or a mistake; it arises out of bad faith, a sense of mistrust that extends both to the work of art itself and the audience receiving it. It's why Hollywood feels the need to tack crude happy endings on remakes of foreign films that seem "too depressing" and "too dark." The worse the world gets, the more reassurance we need that everything's gonna be A-OK.

"Despite this seemingly sad ending," Najjar writes in his director's notes, "I believe the message is quite hopeful. Had Gretta not confronted this melancholia inside her soul, the Conroys' marriage would never really have been mature or complete."

Really? What is this, art as speculative marriage therapy? What's next, *Gretta and Gabriel: Golden Years*?

University Theatre's *The Dead* plays through Nov. 19; tickets at 541-346-4363.

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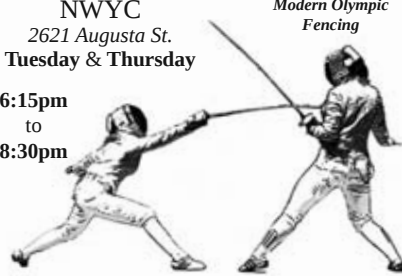
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