



Acting team, L to R Phil Roberts, Silas James, Susannah Frith, Jim Wright, Jason Cavanagh, David John Watton. Maireid Sullivan

## Cyclopean monsters – phallic, brutal and ultimately ridiculous

*An Irishman and a Jew go into a Pub...*

Directed by Brenda Addie,

Open Stage Theatre, University of Melbourne, 16 June 2011

Every year Bloomsday in Melbourne comes up with a new exploration and celebration of Joyce's *Ulysses*. This year the offerings included a theatrical performance of part of the Cyclops chapter of the novel. Titled *An Irishman and a Jew go into a Pub*, it was energetic, fast-paced, and had me hankering to see more.

The Cyclops chapter has a many-layered set of narrators different from the rest of the book. The text presents many challenges to a dramatiser: the complex interplay of narrators requires more than different voices. It's a gory, rambunctious romp of words that – just like a drunk – threaten, bluster and insult, then segue suddenly into orotund rodomontades of special pleading and unreliable patriotic histories.

Brenda Addie and the Bloomsday writers have pulled off an extraordinary achievement to take all these verbal riches – recurring images of violence, blinding and the verbal hammering repetition of the ego/id/eye embodied in the personal pronoun 'I', the satire on romantic, euphemism-laden paeans to Irish nationalism – and make them live for the audience.

Addie's direction was illuminating. Some of the trickier problems of interpretation and exposition were solved with music and back projections. The casting was admirable. Joyce's language comes to explosive life when spoken well, and the actors' engagement was infectious. Susannah Frith was impressive as a Celtic goddess/narrator, while Phil Roberts was excellent as the main narrator, a cynical observer of the dangerous interplay between the Jewish Bloom and the choleric xenophobe Citizen. Jason Cavanagh as The Citizen was marvellous. Addie also gave him the task of being The Dog. It was a bold idea, requiring

physical athleticism and vocal technique and Cavanagh threw himself into it ferociously. It added 'mad dog' as another layer to our appreciation of the anti-Semitic Citizen – truculently unstable, ready to serve a master who can dominate him yet dangerous in the absence of rational control. He *is* the one-eyed supporter, figuratively and literally (Addie even gave him an eye-patch). In him we see the Cyclops, the gigantic, violent and stupid monster; cannibalistic devourer of all that is tender, vulnerable and human. Cavanagh made all this loud, dangerous and credible as he roared, leapt and growled around the confined space Addie allotted to the pub/Cyclops' cave. To emphasise the point, the back projection showed images of Cyclopean monsters – phallic, brutal, pitiless and ultimately ridiculous.

The quiet person of Bloom, (David John Watton) with his rational, educated and informed rejoinders, adds a complex set of possibilities. Meant to calm and defuse tension, they also put us all on tenterhooks – what if the words fail? His cigar (a civilised, pricey and exotic foil to the lumpen parochial Citizen) is the reassuring reminder of Ulysses' stake, used finally to blind the monster and escape. But Bloom's (and Joyce's) words don't fail here: his assertion of Jesus' Jewishness is what finally 'blinds' the Citizen/Cyclops. The performance ends in satisfying noise and chaos as Bloom scarpers, chased unsuccessfully by the mad dog. With such skill and imaginative dramatisation as this, it's a great pity that Bloomsday can't go all year round.

**Juliette Hughes**

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