

Bloomusic, Spanish rhythms, and a Lute: Bloomsday 1998 in Williamstown – Report by Dr. Frances Devlin-Glass, 19 June 1998

This was another peripatetic Bloomsday, wandering in the historic waterside precinct of Williamstown, in 1904, home to many workers at the nearby factories and railway yards, but full of intriguing venues which again reminded the scripters of Dublin 1904. For the second time in its 5-year history, Bloomsday in Melbourne abandoned the central city and headed for the beach for a programme of dramatized readings that was geography-driven. A mid-winter beach with a brisk wind from the Antarctic that alternately blew scudding showers and warmish sun. Throughout the day, about 2000 folk attended 12 events. All but one of the catered events was booked-out three days ahead, and unhappily, many had to be turned away.

Sirens at Sirens

And at 8am, 120 people assembled for a sunsoaked breakfast (no kidneys) in Sirens Restaurant (the name was pure serendipity: it's a chic refurbished bathing pavilion in an art deco style), to watch, what else on a Bloomsday devoted to the music and poetry of the novel, but a dramatisation of **Sirens**?

Before Sirens, breakfasters were rudely extracted from the warm to contemplate with Bloom the water and sewerage system of Dublin (as delineated in **Ithaca**). Jim Howard, the first of three Blooms, braved a stormwater outlet which was very treacherous. He had wet feet all day. A high price to pay for art! The Sirens episode, performed over breakfast, was surprisingly moving, but tricky to stage, and script because of its experimental musical language.

Williamstown was a magnificent stage: in the Botanical Gardens, one of the Clarks, a local worthy (in white marble) became Parnell for the day, and sported a crown (designed to sit on his foot, except our basketballers were not exactly accurate, and three failed attempts meant it had to reside on the plinth below his toe).

Nestor in Williamstown School House

Nestor was mounted in a wonderful bluestone primary school (Williamstown Primary) at kindergarten desks using fifties-ish men wearing caps. It, too, started trivial and quickly moved into another mode. Deasy's anti-Semitism was given a particularly Northern Irish inflection with the help of a Masonic apron.

A Horse-Drawn Hearse Processes

The rain cleared for the funeral procession with horse-drawn antique hearse (1820s) provided by JohnAllison Monkhouse (Funeral Directors), so outdoor readings could be done in the almost-sun. We had prepared a horse-poo script to complement the bureaucratic letter from the council (which Jack Hibberd was to have read), but they did it in the schoolyard, much to the delight of the kids (we'd timed the antique hearse for recess!).

The Seminar

The Seminar aims to feed the intellectually hungry and to entertain those who come for the fun. It too was booked out. There was a full-on Joyce and Music paper by Philip Harvey; one on the songs of '98 (too brief, and liberally punctuated with bits of songs – one needed more) by Ken Mansell; and another on the three Irish composers of opera/operetta Joyce uses so much (Balfe, Wallace and Flotow -who used Irish melodies), and passing references to Tommy Moore by Mimi Colligan, who sang several of the songs she referred to, and speculated on the blurring of the high art/ low art distinction in the opera houses and theatres of Dublin and Cork.

A FEIS at the Town Hall

The Feis (based on the Feis Ceoil of 16 May 1904 and on much historical research) involved the production of an original script written by a committee. All of the actors parodied the songs (a varied anthology of parlour songs, sacred music, music-hall, Joycean songs and oratorio), and injected quite a bit of nonsense and narrative into the feis format, but otherwise the procedures of that institution were observed. The Cavaliero Luigi Denza's (the name could have come out of one of the more promiscuous lists of Cyclops; he was, moreover, the composer of that high art Neapolitan tune, Funiculi Funicula) judgments were viciously cutting, and mainly fictional. This event allowed us to place Joyce in the context of a broad cross-section of contemporary music and in a culture which debated musical performance. It also served to dramatise the extent to which musical Dubliners of 1904 subscribed to a version of the cultural cringe: the affair was clearly symptomatic of being an outpost of empire. It also met a need, to judge by the numerous contenders for honours (Joyce was number 22 in a cohort of tenors, and the sopranos were even more numerous).

A Litany of the Saints

The Church reading was derived from the procession of saints listed in Cyclops, except that we did a Gilbert and Sullivan on it, and included a few of our own: Leo di Caprio, Blessed Assumpta of Ballykissangel, and we denounced Reith of the privatised ports (an allusion to a contemporary political dispute on the waterfront). I'm surprised that Pauline Hanson (currently darling of the politically incorrect, not to say racist forces) was not given a serve

by Mary Keneally, though Jeff Kennett (maverick Premier of Victoria) certainly was (Jeff of the Casino).

A Black Mass in a Morgue

The Morgue was extravagantly surreal: we had to pack about 150 people into a space of about 15 feet square for the black mass and a sequence built around the ghost of Paddy Dignam (a dog had appeared on and off all day among the mourners). The Artist's model who posed as Saint Barbara in the Black Mass came with an extra we'd not anticipated: a Celtic tattoo around her umbilicus. Father O'Flynn had the compulsory carrot where it ought to be, and managed to offend a few. We should have given warnings for the sake of the more sensitive.

Drowned men mourned on the Pier

The Deakin students' gig at Sam's boathouse (a restaurant built around a boat) brought together Stephen's Protean musings about drowned men and the sailor from Eumaeus in a metafictional frame: critics (located within the drama) argued over the monologues and their claims to be poetry using both lines and the devices of silent movies.

A Time-Ball Tower

The final daytime gig occurred at the Timeball tower: readings on timeballs, of course, and as well on time and the sea. Bloom's reasons for being a hydrophile were enumerated, and his theories on death were dramatised by the release of a huge white helium balloon, which took off across the industrial wasteland of oil tanks. The timeball also served as a great site for dramatising Stephen's 'Parable of the Plums'.

The Gala at the Mechanics' Institute: Love's Old Hot Song

Love's Old Hot Song, the grand gala performance staged at the Williamstown Light Opera (formerly the Mechanics Institute), involved around 20 professional actors, musicians, a pianist and a fiddler, and a handful of once-a-year readers, many of whom came out of the audience for their performances. Circe and Penelope were the focus, and music was again an organising principle. The style was music-hall in Circe, and Molly's rehearsals and thinking about her singing competitors and partners allowed a focus on how music for her is a metaphor for love-making.

Bloomsday in Melbourne Inc. are also proud purveyors of two Bloomsday prints by Mary Newsome, much collected by galleries around Australia and overseas. Because we move around so much, it's hard to display these adequately. A problem to be solved in '99. The committee of six is proud to report that we were able to pay The Bloomsday Players (over 40 actors, musicians, singers, theatre directors) at a level which we (and they) felt was just, for the first time.