

An Unblinkered Report by Philip Harvey

The great Cyclops of the internet, brought to us each day courtesy of the one-eyed screen, is not the only way to learn about literature. This year Bloomsday in Melbourne reminded attendees once again of the extensive theatrical possibilities inside the writings of James Joyce. We were presented with what could be called a binocular vision of the episode in *Ulysses* set in Barney Kiernan's pub, the results of which were a brilliant poetic comedy.

Readers of *Ulysses* readily remember that this episode comprises a kind of parallel text. Realistic accounts of the rantings and ravings of a bunch of boyos at the bar are interleaved with mock-heroic passages in celebration of an older Ireland that may or may not have existed. The 'Irish Twilight' digressions were recited by an amazing actor (Susannah Frith) who went through more costume changes than David Bowie in his glam phase, each Magnificent Prose Rendition with a costume befitting the hyperbolic content, each more outrageous than the last. These speeches require considerable mnemonic stamina, some of them being Rabelaisian-like lists of revered Irish sites, or famous Irishmen we know and love, some of them only tenuously Irish. Frith's appearance in one of these digressions, in the tallest mitre this side of the Eternal City, complete with robes and a procession of dubious-looking acolytes, she reciting names of saints canonised and improvised, provoked mirth rather than censure. It is just one example amongst many of how the Director (Brenda Addie) matched text with costume to provide commentary, humorous counterpoint, and the kind of extra special and truly original fashion show that will not be found in *Vogue*. The perpetual slideshow was inspired, at times truly illuminating the speeches. It never became a distraction either from the players or their performance.

Meanwhile, on the opposite side of the stage, the men in the pub got progressively more animated with each pint. Their conversation veers unhesitatingly from one thing to another, but the Matter of Ireland is never far from their addled thoughts. Nationalism is theme, argument, possibility, dream and target of this episode. The central drive is a character named The Citizen (Jason Cavanagh), a one-eyed, loudmouthed bigot. His aggressive nature was reinforced by also playing his dog Garryowen; the apotheosis of this dual role was Cavanagh's delivery of a poem that was more canine howls than recognisable English. The Citizen has a lot to say about Ireland, but it is transmitted in a disorderly and emotive fashion that defeats its objective of total conversion. This painful process was well enacted by Cavanagh, augmented by his buddies. We are left to guess the real name of The Citizen. Scholars continue the conjectures to this day. Readers of Homer will know that naming plays an important part in the Cyclops episode, with Odysseus tricking the Giant by saying his name is 'No Man'. This role of anonymous traveller in the face of attack is embodied in *Ulysses* by Leopold Bloom. In the production Bloom (David John Watton) was played gently with understatement, though it has to be said that anyone looks understated when confronted by the Citizen. Bloom's proper manners and correct response at all times were articulated superbly, especially during the more testing moments when the bar-flies Joe Hynes (Silas James) and Alf Bergan (Jim Wright) started making veiled anti-Semitic remarks

or unsubtle innuendoes about Molly Bloom's current state of affairs. The set was cleverly arranged with beer-kegs for seats and tables, an ever-present reminder that these boys are all talk and no action, drinking away their days in a city of paralysis. Despite Bloom's present predicaments, he is the one who both thinks for himself and makes himself active. The symbolism of Bloom refusing a drink but requesting a cigar is a subtle gesture of homage by Joyce to his hero of the quotidian. The rise and fall of the dialogue was directed with great care, reaching its crescendo with the inevitable explosion of hatred from The Citizen towards Bloom. Attendees can still see the Jacobs biscuit tin flying in imaginary slow motion across the stage.

Crucial to our understanding of this episode is our appreciation of the enigmatic Narrator. It is the only episode in *Ulysses* where this device is employed. For some readers the Narrator is a thoroughly unpleasant individual, actively encouraging violence and antipathy in others. He thrives on conflict, albeit vicariously. Other readers interpret the Narrator as a Joycean alter-ego, the dark side of Joyce that is drawn to the facts of hatred and violence even though he personally detests and denounces them. Again, the Narrator has no name. The production went with a hyped-up Narrator (Phil Roberts) who engages forcefully with the energy – physical, emotional and linguistic – that is everywhere around him. Whether this energy is going anywhere or achieving much is open to question, and is indeed a main message of the episode. He kept our interest, without once gaining our sympathy, which is perhaps how it ought to be. The Narrator walked about the stage reciting from the Book, like some preacher of the old-time religion. Nationalism in a suppressed society will be internalised and find its way outside in challenging and dangerous ways. Enthusiasm is followed by the maudlin, cheeriness by vitriol. The Director and her Script Providers (il maestro Graeme Anderson, Sian Cartwright, Frances Devlin-Glass and Roz Hames) stuck to this shifting dynamic in the Narrator's words, with admirable results. Joyce understood acutely how sentimentality is the other side of the coin from nationalistic and other kinds of violence: the two sides of this coin are displayed in the parallel texts of the episode. Onstage it was blatant and transfixing.

The history of Bloomsday in Melbourne can now recognisably be divided into two periods, before and after the Centenary of the setting, 2004. BC (Before the Centenary) saw the day planned by a Committee that wrote many delegated and variegated scripts, some of them highly original using 'Ulysses' as the starting point more than the focus. The same Committee was also responsible for finding multiple venues, worrying about lost sheep at peripatetic street readings, all bookings, the lot. AD (After Dublin) has seen the curtailment of a full writing team in favour of direct use of full-text, minus any new words from outside the book. Thus last year we saw the brothel scene known as Circe turned into a carefully crafted theatre piece for small ensemble. Likewise this year, Cyclops was given this intense treatment. The change, from a large production team and overflow of professional and amateur actors to a tight

stage crew and only expert actors, has seen a renaissance in the quality of productions for Bloomsday in Melbourne. Expectations have been lifted with each new stage production as, clearly, this mode works exceedingly well, bringing out the best in the actors and direction. Concentration on a single episode works well, opens up all sorts of new avenues, and is a treat for the long-term punters. The Open Stage in Swanston Street was an ideal venue.

This year's seminar speakers looked at this same Cyclops episode, in particular our Director Frances Devlin-Glass argued for the Irish patterning of *Ulysses* generally as part of a deliberate literary structure that goes along inside the Homeric parallels. She wished us to see the digressions in Cyclops as not simply period satires but as texts that inform, bleed into, and comment on the 'action' parts of the episode. Val Noone questioned Bloom's pacifism: Val is a well-known Melbourne activist who was involved in the Vietnam Moratorium. He couldn't but see the treatment of Sinn Fein founders in the scene as full of deliberate jokes by Joyce. Coming from an expert in the minutiae of Irish political history, this only confirmed the audience's understanding that everything in 'Ulysses' might ultimately be a joke, even the bits they don't understand. Val also talked enlighteningly about all the Irish nationalists active in Melbourne in 1904. He even introduced what is probably a first to Bloomsday in Melbourne, a quiz to identify the people whose names were used for the branches of the Irish National Foresters, and that marched on St Patrick's Day 1904 in Melbourne. The audience proved in fact to be very well-informed and next time the Committee will have to be ready with prizes.

The dinner was held again at La Notte in Lygon Street Carlton, the Little Rome of Melbourne. It is seventy years since the death of the author. Your correspondent arranged the dinner entertainment, a reading of the *New York Times* obituary of January 1941, interspersed with ironic or affirmative counterpoints from James Joyce's writings. Bill Johnston read the *Ulysses* bits, Jim Wright the *Finnegans Wake* parts, and Philip Harvey was the obituarist. The obituary is full of inaccuracies, which were brought to the diners' attention by use of a duck whistle. Coinages were underlined by a music box and dubious statements in the obituary were indicated by the tingling of a triangle. We live in a post-Ellmann world, spoilt with the amount of factual information about Joyce, his family and friends. Much of the contents of the obituary was ten or twenty years out-of-date. Plainly the obituary was lifted straight from the newspaper's 'deaths file' without much care for editorial reflection. The joke was pretty much on the *New York Times*. Those at the dinner then stood to toast James Joyce. The author is dead! Long live the author!