

1995 *Ulysses* in Collins Street



Encouraged, even emboldened, by the success of the inaugural peripatetic Bloomsday celebration in Melbourne in 1994, the W. B. Yeats Society and the Bloomsday Players extended and professionalised the range of events on 16 June 1995. The Bloomsday Players formally constituted themselves as a professional company with Simon McGuinness taking responsibility for the actors. Many of the same performers featured again this year (Jim Howard as one of three Blooms, Liz Kemp as one of three Mollys, Gillian Hardy performing Molly and the milkwoman at the Martello Tower breakfast, as well as her pièce de résistance, the commanding whoremistress Bella/Bello Cohen, and Eugene O'Rourke, who worked as narrator for the day). In addition, some new fringe-professional actors augmented the company, most notably Dublin-born Eddie McShortall as Buck Mulligan, Jeff Keogh as a saturnine Stephen Dedalus, the versatile singer/actress Maureen Andrew in a variety of roles (as Molly for the dinner show and, at various points throughout the day, and as Gertie McDowell), and John Flaus as one of three Blooms.

Some events (the Davy Byrne's Bar Lunch with readings from Lestrygonians at Mietta's, the visit to Collected Works Bookshop to begin their annual marathon reading of the novel) remained unaltered on the 1994 pattern, but for the loyal followers who make the strenuous whole-day pilgrimage, much was different in 1995. The gigs were more formal; full dramatisations rather than readings were *de rigueur* at Mietta's and unsuspecting users of the Circle tram became Dollymount-bound and were exposed to a range of Dublinesque eccentrics, whether or not they chose. The day began with breakfast in the Kensington Room at the Grand Hyatt – a formal affair presided over by the patron of the W. B. Yeats Society of Victoria, Dr Davis McCaughey. The first of the guest speakers, Professor Chris Wallace-Crabbe (University of Melbourne) recalled with affection his early tentative forays into *Ulysses*, and the Hon. Barry Jones eschewed politics (permitted by his brief) in order to place the novel as one that had, along with many illustrious writers (despite a high incidence of Nobel laureates in Ireland per head of population) failed to secure its author a Nobel Prize. He then read passages from Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy* which served as a testimony to the novel's canonical status, its ability (only just) to oust Evelyn Waugh on an Indian university syllabus, its covert place in Irish letters, and Joyce's central place in Flann O'Brien's *The Dalkey Archive* (the great Myles na Gopaleen is said to have died reading Joyce).

Full dramatisations of each of the Martello Tower and 7 Eccles Street breakfasts ensued, but not before the magnificent Edwardian-period iron bed (lent by Aileen Thompson) collapsed when the portly Haynes (a.k.a. Simon McGuinness), in an impromptu unrehearsed moment, slid sideways onto it. Correctly reassembled, it dominated the

stage for each of the formal gigs, and made a stately crossing of Collins Street without further mishap. It represented a considerable advance on the small folding contraption which had served in 1994, and moreover was useful as a kind of dock and later a pillory for the scene from the Circe episode in which Bloom is the subject of scrutiny in the Court of Conscience. To locate Bloom in his bed, functioning as an analogue for a dock and the stocks is the kind of surreal and symbolic transformation which the analogically-prone, precise mind of Joyce would, I think, have understood. The introduction in 1995 of the characters of Buck and Stephen made possible dramatisations which had not been attempted in 1994, mainly because of doubts on the part of myself as chief scripter and dramaturg about its communicability with a general public (many, but not all, of whom could safely be assumed not to have read the text).

Simon McGuinness and I agreed that our key priorities for Bloomsday are in the following order of significance:

1. Celebration of *Ulysses*;
2. Education about the text, and bringing it orally (in Dublin accents, as far as that is practicable) to those keen to increase their familiarity with it; and
3. Entertainment (and the intention at all costs of not having it bore people).

However, I bit the bullet this year, and made adaptations of the Scylla and Charybdis episode – to my mind one of the most difficult chapters in the novel and one which invites reading rather than acting. It is also a chapter which needs a wholesale battery of scholarly footnotes to be comprehensible. My doubts about the wisdom of this were exacerbated when at the first reading with the actors, a half-hour script turned into three hours of explication of the text. Joyce's text in this chapter is a detailed cross-referencing of Shakespearean biographical facts (as they were known in 1904, a constraint Joyce adheres to with 99% fidelity) with Shakespearean plays and poems, and a complex interweaving of real-life and fictional motivations, all of which serve a Joycean metaphysics and aesthetics, and make reference to Joycean and Shakespearean biographical parallels. Just to further complicate matters, there is the problem of the chapter requiring no narrator (being a mixture of dialogue and inner speech), and the fact that the Dedalus character engages in both argument with his peers and the librarians and debate with his inner voice, which continually advises him on how to be effective rhetorically. For this episode we were also trying out a new venue, Kay Craddock's Antiquarian Bookshop at the George's end of Collins Street.

We had been lured to this elegant site in 1994 because Kay had, independently and unaware of the inaugural Bloomsday activities, mounted a Joycean window-display as her own celebration of the day, and because she had, when we noted it, invited us back in 1995 and been a staunch supporter of the venture, making depositions on our behalf to the Collins Street Precinct Group. The shop, we decided, was the perfect venue to stand as an antipodean National Library of Ireland (the State Library, also one of our supporters, was another possible contender for this episode, but contemporary users might have been disturbed, and the handsome steps are always at the mercy of the antipodean winter weather). The reading, despite its difficulties, was a triumph, and a tribute to the actors' craft. Much that is obscure on the page, with appropriate pointing, with inner and real voice differentiation, with gesture and body language, can be communicated. It is a venture I would repeat, and perhaps that chapter might become the one which is the subject of next year's Demystifying Joyce symposium series.

Because, as the day progressed, we became aware of how few of those who were with us, including university people, were familiar with the text, The Bloomsday Players have committed themselves to a series of public monthly readings and discussions. These will serve, hopefully, to familiarise more readers, both the common reader and the academic one, with the work, and will serve as a training ground for actors and readers who might want to participate in subsequent years. Those actors who were meeting the text for the first time as actors rather than readers were especially impressed by its linguistic virtuosity and its sense of fun. The best reward for our efforts was the often-stated intention (on the part of participants both active and passive) to go away and read it before next year.

In 1994, we had divided the group into two for lunch-time gigs, doing Lestrygonians for those with a taste for food (and the pocket to suit) at Mietta's, and a miscellaneous set of readings featuring a range of Dubliners at the A.R.T. (artroundtown) Gallery. This year we further split the group by adding another venue – a moving one: the Circle Trams. The trams are a difficult environment for actors to work: auditors are often there involuntarily; tram-conductors and drivers had not necessarily been informed about our permit to work the trams; there is much noisy competition from the trams themselves and the traffic; and performers were not always identifiable by costumes. Readings focussed on passages featuring cityscapes, often those observed by pedestrians, tram- or carriage-riders, or they constituted enactments of biographical anecdotes. This gig was more loosely organised than I would have wished (and mental notes have been made to improve this next year by organising drama students from Rusden and the Victorian College of the Arts well ahead of time), but those who participated said that it worked quite successfully with some unsuspecting tram users with Irish accents being drafted to read on an impromptu basis.

I was at the A.R.T. (artroundtown) Gallery readings and can vouch for their effectiveness. Gallery proprietor, Eva Eden had organised a Joyce-inspired installation of paintings, prints and ceramics, and a commemorative print by Colin Shingleton. In addition to prepared readings, there were readings from the floor. An innovation which is designed to become a regular event at Bloomsday was a reading of Joyce's horoscope by a Blavatskyesque Gillian Barnsley, complete with astral charts, which was followed by Joyce's parodic account of a seance in the Cyclops chapter.

The winner of the costume prize, Peter Jones, accoutred as 'The Spirit of Dublin' in gold velvet striped morning coat and perilous bowler, performed a histrionic parody of the execution of Robert Emmett (from the Cyclops chapter), with magic effects (a man of many parts, he is also a professional magician). Mary Kenneally, comedienne, returned by chance from a funeral, read from the Hades chapter, while Graeme Anderson, in the persona of Blazes Boylan, lewdly salivated over peaches and cadged a flower for his lover under paintings of lascivious female bodies.

The afternoon symposium, in the spirit of demystification to which this continuing series is committed, took the form of a joint paper in which Elaine Barry (Monash) and Frances Devlin-Glass (Deakin), with the assistance of a phalanx of ten readers (actors and others), examined the naturalistic narrative and the parodies of the Cyclops chapter of the novel. The emphasis was on the methods Joyce uses to deconstruct nationalism, the intimacy and detachment of the perspective taken in the chapter towards Bloom, and Joyce's immersion in and critique of the archaic discourses of his own culture. The readings

tended to highlight how well the naturalistic narrative works as dialogue, and the playful extravagance of the parodies and the interrelationship between narrative and parodies.

The Bloomsday organizers are keen that the day should include a number of events which are available to the smallest purse – indeed, to no purse at all. The State Library of Victoria provided their theatrette for the late afternoon gig, and the W. B. Yeats Society, with the cooperation of Guinness, provided some excellent sustenance for the body and the spirit. Although moderately well-supported, this event did not attract the numbers of students we had hoped. Patrons for the highlight of the day's proceedings had the choice of dinner in Mietta's Grand Dining Room before the show, or just the show. The dinner was well patronised, and the show a sell-out. Mietta's lounge, with its heavy Victorian furnishings, its mirrors and screens and busy walls, astonishingly accommodated the plain bedstead. Attention to the strict chronology was abandoned for the evening performance. There was easy movement between the bed, the brothel, Sandymount strand and Mary Star of the Sea, interwoven with the music Joyce loved and so often alluded to with his own language.

The goodwill of audience members was palpable as they spontaneously joined with the three singers – Josephine Fisher, Di Silber and Mimi Colligan – often simply humming quietly. Molly's signature-tune, 'Love's Old Sweet Song', predictably, was used as the tenor and during the climax of the final monologue. Two actors (Maureen Andrew and Liz Kemp) portrayed Molly in ways intended to highlight her multifariousness and internal contradictions: Liz's Molly was warm, voluptuous, emphatically in her body; Maureen's was relaxed, outrageous, fun-loving. Similarly, the three Blooms (Jim Howard's everyman, Simon McGuinness's deliciously bent gender-bender, and John Flaus's unregenerate dreamer) permitted a range of perspectives which, I think, deepened one's grasp of how rich the characterisation is. Theatrical director Simon McGuinness experimented with the space, not always using the stage, but having performers sprinkled through the audience, moving through it and using other available spaces and the height provided by rostra, and mirrors which offered a variety of views of characters in stylised action. This, to some extent, helped the actors deal with the difficult acoustics of the rear of the Lounge which abuts the bar.

Another experiment which I found less convincing was that of retaining the often non-naturalistic stage directions for the Circe chapter and giving them to a narrator. The thinking which served to justify it was that patrons needed to be reminded that the text was a novel rather than pure theatre. The device worked well for those stage directions that were narrative in character (for example, the description of Bloom's eight children, and the genealogy, which was indigenised and updated with references to Kennett, the Grand Prix and Cheryl and Ian in order to avoid the more obscure historical references – our only interference with Joyce's text) but tended to impede the drama when used to mark emotional states, which are, in my view, better enacted.

Another innovation in 1995, the year in which Bloomsday was for the first time celebrated in Cyberspace, was the establishment of an International Essay Competition, designed to elicit reports of Bloomsday celebrations from around the world, offering some substantial prizes and guaranteed publication. We know why we celebrate Bloomsday, but are keen to find out why this day has become a secular literary festival worldwide.

Report by Frances Devlin-Glass