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Bloomsday-in-Melbourne in Dublin



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Dublin and that novel draw Australian troupe to Ireland

Fast-paced look at Joyce's women

Meg McNena of Moonee Ponds, Victoria, was in Dublin during the ReJoyce Dublin 2004 celebrations and took in the first-ever performance in that city by the Bloomsday-in-Melbourne group.

The sun shone bright on Bloomsday 2004. Round the corner from my friend's flat in Phibsborough, breakfast was served outside the Joyce Centre in North Great George's Street. Thankfully eggs, rashers, sausages and coffee had supplanted gizzards and urine-scented kidneys. Many enjoyed stepping out in Edwardian style.

Irish newspapers, radio and television buzzed about James Joyce, *Ulysses*, and the centenary of Stephen Dedalus and Leopold Bloom traversing Dublin on 16 June 1904. This was the actual date when the then struggling author first walked out with his love, Nora Barnacle.

Lectures, workshops, exhibitions and performances indicate Joyce's immense influence in literature, art, music and culture. With worldwide celebrations, aficionados and detractors weighed bouquets and brickbats for the challenging novel.

A quick left at the end of the street found me in the quaint milkbar, The Mullingar. Shopkeeper, Tony Fortune, and customer, Richard Robinson, chatted over the counter. Tony's Dad ran the small shop from 1932. Revellers from dances at The Metropole and The Ballerina would crowd the pavement for a nightcap of pints of milk and gurcake. These cheery ambassadors assured me there was no livelier place to be than The Monto. Tony has a son, Noel, in St Kilda and Richard's sister, Evelyn McDonagh, has lived in Fawkner for 30 years. A big howyra to them both.

My next stop was the Dublin Writers

Museum in Parnell Square. Amid Georgian splendour and inspiring memorabilia sits Patrick Kavanagh's typewriter, a first edition of *Dracula* and Samuel Beckett's telephone with a red button to exclude incoming calls. Upstairs in front of James Joyce's piano, Neil O'Shea, an accomplished actor, showcases works from famous Irish writers. His engaging daily show of anecdote and recital animates an amazing literary heritage.

Scribbling an ode to the lonely piano when the room emptied brought me an invitation to a coffee with the actor and an American professor of cultural studies. I never know where a poem will lead. Our chat about paganism and Christianity from Irish, Mexican and Australian perspectives seemed to mirror the melting pot that Dublin had become since my last visit 20 years ago. New tones and multicoloured shawls graced the face of the city.

Cabaret feel

Crossing Stephen's Green with conflicting directions from friendly locals, I looked forward to surprising Frances Devlin-Glass (a Táin mate). The Bloomsday-in-Melbourne production of *Her Song be Sung* was playing at The Sugar Club in Leeson Street.

Frances, an associate professor at Deakin and director of the Melbourne group, had co-written the play with playwright Roz Hames, and theatrical impresario Di Silber. The Australian and Irish governments are among those who sponsored the Dublin performance.

Candlelight booths gave the full house a cabaret feel. I sat beside a friend of local cast members, Maria Blaney and Sarah Purcell from the Estuary Players in Balldoyle. Timing and chemistry on stage showed no signs that the ensemble had only gathered in Dublin on June 7. Groups had rehearsed in Melbourne, London, Dublin and Brisbane. Bravo to international relations, the talents of director Gillian Hardy and a skilled team. I grinned proudly at a box labelled *Australiana* in the bookshop set.

Music-hall operatics of Brisbane's The Tatty Tenors (Ralph Devlin, Ron Jackson, Jim Ahern) and soprano, Sharon Moore, lifted the audience to another time and place.

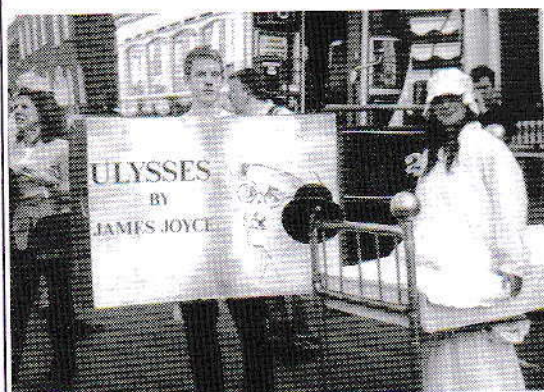
The play is fast-paced, entertaining and informative. Reluctant bride, Bella (Laura O'Sullivan-Vines), sets us off and running when she bursts into a

bookshop needing advice. Owner Al (Simon McGuinness) has enough problems eluding dominatrix wife Reggie (Felicity McInnes) to buy his escape with a missing Nora-Joyce letter, stashed in one of his books. However, ghostly patrons Harriet Shaw (Margaret Doyle) and Sylvia Beach (Deirdre Gillespie) arrive to claim their right to the letter.

The women argue about their part in Joyce's novel and life. Simon McGuinness deftly doubles as James Joyce and Leopold Bloom to collide with raunchy wife Reggie and Bella in the monstrosities of act three. It was an industrious, crafted and engaging show with energetic performances and a tight script. However, those unfamiliar with Joyce may have needed more exposition of character dynamics to understand their journeys.

Despite distance and copyright laws, which required removal of any published Joyce lines from the original work performed in Melbourne, *Her Song be Sung* did both Joyce and Melbourne proud.

In Westmoreland Street, on my way home, I walked over one of the many Joyce pavement plaques. It cited roly-poly from Harrisons. Well, Harrisons had become Charlie's Oriental Food Bar with no sign of jampuff or mock-turtle. This adaptation of history seemed to encapsulate my ramblings and discoveries in the changeling city that is Dublin. Ω



ReJoyce Dublin 2004 brought many on to the streets

Irish protests against Bush visit

