



A Report on Bloomsday 1996

Readings in South Melbourne and Brunswick St.

Mid-June is early winter in Melbourne. In a year not marked by fine days, Bloomsday in Melbourne in 1996 was singularly blessed with a misty start and hooting fog horns on the Bay, followed by eye-scalding winter clarity at noon. In total, patrons exceeded 700 at 8 events, making it our most successful yet, thanks to the dedication of Simon McGuinness and the Bloomsday Players, and the organisational miracles wrought by Di Silber and her team.



Stephen in the distance, taken from the Pier

One hundred or so brave souls left their homes in darkness to attend the 8 a.m. start to Bloomsday at the corner of the bluestone sea wall near the Kerford Road pier which served as a Martello Tower. The beach venue was the most visually stunning backdrop – with the wharves and boats of the port and the Westgate Bridge looming vaguely above. What ensued was a very professional enactment of the Telemachus and Proteus episodes. As Stephen (actor Geoff Keogh) meandered along the beach through the mist in Hamlet hat and with staff, he was momentarily upstaged by a jogger who approached the pier and bowed to the throng before making his way back down the beach past the saturnine poet. Joyce would have relished this postmodern meeting of old and new obsessions with the body.

Proteus (Ch. 3), involving some quite recondite inner monologue, was a difficult episode to translate into drama but the actors (Geoff and John Higginson, directed by Simon McGuinness) worked for clarity and achieved it.

Much was done by way of a sound-recorded and synchronised stream of consciousness, broadcast so that the auditors on the pier were party to Stephen's inner musings and his range of solipsistic eccentric poetic behaviours. It was reassuring to find that these most difficult chapters of the novel, like the Scylla and Charybdis chapter which we tackled with some pizzaz at Kay Craddock's Bookshop in 1995, can be rendered communicatively. It is not an easy novel to turn into theatre, as we find out year by year, but the reward is the increasing numbers who return each year finally having made their first reading of *Ulysses* after years of promising to do so.

The elegant ambience of the Victoria Hotel and the efficiency of its staff made Breakfast in the Albert Room (another cultural dissonance!) a sensuous pleasure, and has been made much of in feedback received by the Bloomsday Players have received. Likewise, the lunch at Lorna's Irish Rover Cafe. Both venues were extremely crowded, and the staff in each case delivered superb food and accommodated theatrical events with aplomb.

The use of trams is not new to the Bloomsday revels; however, careful attention to how they might be used to amplify and clarify text was a new development. Care in selecting episodes dealing with trams and perambulations worked well on this mobile venue. The trams are, of course, a resource available in Melbourne which cannot be duplicated in many other Bloomsday-celebrating locations around the world. It was a (genuine) surprise to meet Sylvia Beach at the tramstop, and to hear of her dealings with GBS over *Ulysses*. The winner of the Bloomsdress competition, Steve Duke, in the character as well as the costume of the Citizen, blustered his noisy jingoistic way through to the last gasp. The people one meets on the streets of Melbourne! However, the organisers hope for more attention to costume and character in the years to come.



The organisers repeated the 1994 Hades procession with John Allison Monkhouse's truly baroque 1820 hearse and Clydesdales, though this time, with the assistance of the Port Philip Council and the Police, we were a

presence on Acland Street and the Upper Esplanade, with a long procession of several hundred mourners. Parodies of Irish versions of death were the subject of readings at Alfred Place, and readers drew on Joyce's parody of occultist rituals (à la Madame Blavatsky, played by Gillian Barnsley) and of the ritual execution of the patriot (parodying accounts of Robert Emmet's death (though of course he is not named by Joyce) but with unexpected magic effects by Peter Jones).

Attendance at the annual seminar, this year held at the St. Kilda Library, and sponsored for the first time by the Centre for Research in Cultural Communication, was also at capacity, and those who attended were a different clientele from those we'd met earlier in the day. The winner of the 1995 International Bloomsday Competition, Stephen McLaren, of the University of Western Sydney (Nepean) gave the seminar paper on Aeolus. His presentation was trenchant, and his tack on Joyce's deconstruction of national identity was to point to the already hybrid nature of the education of the interlocutors. There was less time to prepare the readings at this session, and it cannot be said that they worked quite as well as they might have, though Steve Woods' games with the Aeolus headlines were inventive.

The evening Gala involved some fine acting (especially from Gillian Hardy) and singing (Maureen Andrews). The acoustics of the venue (the Colonial Hotel in Brunswick St) were problematic for some patrons, and a more suitable venue is being sought for 1997. The loss of Mietta's, used in 1994 and 1995, was difficult to make good, though our hosts at the Old Colonial Inn were very accommodating and helpful. For the first time in 1996, we confronted the difficult issue of how to render theatrically the Ithaca episode with its catechetical mode. With judicious cutting and some imaginative direction by Simon McGuinness, and a great deal of rehearsal, some ways around its challenges were found. It constituted a very useful bridge between the Circe episode and Molly's soliloquy, which we have decided is perhaps the only essential ingredient of the climactic Bloomsday theatricals.

Planning has long since begun for Bloomsday in Melbourne on Monday 16 June 1997. It will occur for the first time independently of the Yeats Society and under the aegis of Bloomsday in Melbourne and The Bloomsday Players. The intention is to return to the city and to the Mitre Tavern/Savage Club precinct. The late afternoon seminar is booked for the new State Library Theatre, which also plans to hold a special exhibition of its print holdings of Joyceana.