

DULBINERS: A QUARTET

an audio play suite

by Arthur Yorinks

inspired by the short stories of James Joyce

NOTES FROM THE PLAYWRIGHT

To acknowledge and celebrate the 100th anniversary of the publication of *Dubliners*, the collection of short stories by James Joyce, The Greene Space at WNYC and WQXR (with the generous support of the Sidney E. Frank Foundation) engaged me to write four audio plays based on four of the Joyce stories. Well, to declare such an assignment a “challenge” is to linger in the land of understatement. Indeed.

When thinking about the work of James Joyce, one usually alights on *Ulysses* or *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* or *Finnegan’s Wake*. It’s often, too often, the novels of a writer’s oeuvre that accrues the gaze and accolades, the bride to the bride’s maids, to the neglect of their short stories. And in some respect, I was guilty of such nonsense myself. I heard the name James Joyce and simply fell into a panic, a momentary intimidation. There were good reasons, I presumed, that his work served as source material for so few films and pieces of theater. At least so few in relation to how well-known and significant Joyce’s works are; works that ushered literature into the modern era.

What would I do, I thought, with the terribly long poetic passages, what would I do with work so completely “literary” in their nature (and there are such works) that they resist and repel attempts at dramatization? Well, I purchased the cheapest most unadorned paperback version of *Dubliners* I could find thinking that somehow if it looked like an airport novel instead of a literary tome, I would have an easier time of it. I hadn’t read *Dubliners* in over twenty years and my memory of it was dim, and erroneously melded into the common rap on Joyce: incomprehensible endless prose.

How completely wrong I was. Like having listened to the weatherman, umbrella in hand, staring at the sun in a clear sky, such was my experience reading the stories of *Dubliners*. Each of the fifteen stories (some just a few pages) were revelatory; as they so poetically and unsparingly revealed the lives of ordinary people in Dublin in the early part of the 20th century. They captured, for me, not only the heart and soul of a city, of a

culture, but at the same time the nature of the everyday grind of living, how impossible it all is while we continue to hope for the best. The inevitable hovers; interrupted now and then by the pleasantness of the mundane, the passion of a momentary crush, or the memory of a first love. Here is a master class in writing; to read what seems so specific and personal, so Irish, so other century, so seemingly removed from my experience and yet, story after story, I was inexplicably moved, seeing myself in the landscape of others.

I was smitten and now wanted the whole picture. I read letters from Joyce to his publisher and his publisher to Joyce tracing the idiotic history of the book's publication. I read as many essays on Joyce as I could get my hands on and then came back to read the collection again, this time the Robert Scholes Viking edition.

While reading the stories a second time, I realized how perfectly Joyce's language, his rhythms, but most importantly his intimate portraits were suited to the intimate medium of radio – the personal and primal nature of audio theater.

I thought, as I have so often before, about what it means to create an audio play from a piece of literature. It's a tricky business. Often the inclusion of original writing is needed to create an audio play based on other material—much the same as a screenplay or stage play adapted from other content relies on new writing. “Dangerous” or even “insane” might be more apt words to describe writing an audio play based on well-known and well-loved works. If you start off declaring complete faithfulness to your source, you run the risk of putting yourself in a creative box, which makes for poor theater. The opposite, playing too loose, begs the question of why use the material in the first place, and risks the enmity of an audience wanting and deserving a connection to the original and the familiar. The job is to write with your ear, to listen as a reader and create a piece of theater where your hand is invisible behind the voice of the source. Like I said, tricky. And dare I say, gutsy. It's not a forgery. It's not homage. It should be a seamless blend, a duet of two writers forming one sound.

On my second reading of *Dubliners* I knew that the best method of conveying the experience of the book was to choose a story from each of the “ages” that Joyce referred to in one of his letters to his publisher. Those ages – childhood, adolescence, and maturity – formed the basis of my first three plays, using *The Dead* as the final piece.

But then, just as Joyce wanted and required his stories to be published as one collection, one work, so too did I begin to realize that the four audio plays I was writing should be one, one play in four parts. There is a connective tissue between all of Joyce's

Dubliners stories, and the poetic echoes in the four I chose – *Araby*, *Eveline*, *Clay*, and *The Dead* – recalled to me a suite in four movements. Music was a significant part of Joyce’s life and is an indelible part of Irish culture and it naturally runs through these stories like threads in a tapestry; so it made perfect sense to use music to bind this work together. I wanted the audience not only to hear the music Joyce referenced in his stories, but also I wanted to find and select music that could create epiphanic spaces between the four parts. And though I meant for this play to be faithful to and illuminating of Joyce’s literary triumph, it is by necessity my personal response to *Dubliners* as a reader first and then as a fellow writer, hoping in the end for it to be a *Joycean* experience in its own right.

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