

## The LA Beat

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### Open Fist Theatre Company brings James Joyce Inspired Musical “The Dead” to Life!

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Photo Courtesy of Eric Neil Gutierrez

“To love is to suffer. To avoid suffering one must not love. But then one suffers from not loving. Therefore, to love is to suffer; not to love is to suffer; to suffer is to suffer. To be happy is to love. To be happy, then, is to suffer, but suffering makes one unhappy. Therefore, to be unhappy, one must love or love to suffer or suffer from too much happiness...” so goes my favorite quote from Woody Allen’s “Love and Death”—A parody, no doubt of Friedrich Nietzsche’s life-confirming, “To live is to suffer, to survive is to find some meaning in the suffering.”

But do **the dead**...or rather, those skating the thin ice betwixt life and death simply by living; knowing that they will eventually be dead by default of living—suffer? This is the key thread running through my mind while watching James Joyce’s novella brought to life onstage via joyous music, giddy tipsiness and festive Irish jigs!

Set in Dublin Ireland around Christmas/Epiphany at the turn of the century, the musical version of James Joyce’s “The Dead” examines the juxtaposition between love, mirth and existential suffering in a manner that cannot be ignored. Book and lyrics by Richard Nelson with music and lyrics by Sean Davey, the story in question begins in a stately, elegant house inhabited by two elderly music teachers and sisters, Julia Morkan and Kate

Morkan played respectively by a sympathetic and earnest Jacque Lynn Colton and a sincere and vibrant Judith Scarpone. The two sisters inhabit the house with niece Mary Jane Morkan and gloriously await the arrival of their favorite nephew Gabriel Conroy played strongly by Rob Nagle.

It is the Morkan sisters' annual Christmas party and the stage is set for all manner of festivities situated against the backdrop of Gabriel's subtle to not-so subtle but somewhat assured social awkwardness. Added tensions include aunt Julia's most harrowing and noticeable ailment, party guests' varying political and nationalistic leanings, Freddy, the embarrassing relative who attends every family gathering completely schnockered and, at the end of the party, and unbeknownst to Gabriel Conroy, the state of his marriage and his familiarity, or lack thereof, with his wife of many years.

The story itself reminds me, probably **totally incorrectly**, of an Irish version of "The Sound of Music" in a house where music is already condoned if not encouraged, but salves all slings and arrows of earthly existence amidst the tension of social expectations, inevitable death and marital strife. (And really, who needs Nazis when you've got all that?—Not to imply Nazis are any less horrific or any more benign, but you've gotta have a villain somewhere in the mix so as to promote all dramatic conflict; if not literal then metaphorical.)



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The piece itself flows like a novella as it does not exhibit a traditionally theatrical dramatic arc. More reminiscent of a narrative triptych, it observes three differing stories within the context of its own existential exploration; elements of social mannerisms and nationalistic strife within the auspices of the party, Aunt Julia's illness and experiential mortality at the celebration's conclusion and Gabriel Conroy's erroneously misdirected lust to round out the story's examinant end at the discovery that the wistful expression his wife adopted while

singing his direction, at his aunts' annual celebration, had nothing to do with the object of her observation; and everything to do with a distant ghost-like reminiscence from her past.

Alone in a hotel room at the end of the play and **blessed** with this new epiphany, discovered around the same time of the year, will Gabriel look out on to the falling snow turning everything ghostly white as it cascades onto its surfaces as something that sanitizes and separates us all. "Better to pass boldly into that other world, in the full glory of some passion, than fade and wither dimly with age," are some of his final words as he realizes he hovers the thin ice between death and the living dead as he ruminates upon the latter more faded notion...

Mounted by the Open Fist Theatre Company at the Greenway Theatre, the production is polished and professional. Sets are simplistic yet substantial and though there is nothing in particular adorning the rear wall, a refreshing relief of snowflakes supplies a most festive impression of the paradoxical party in progress. The costuming by A. Jeffrey Schoenberg is consummate, the acting admirable, the direction by Charles Otte, decent. The live music; magnificent! There's also one jig amidst the singing that is sublimely stirring!

"The Dead" is performed on Fridays and Saturdays at 8 pm, Sundays at 7 pm until February 22<sup>nd</sup> at the Greenway Court Theatre, 544 North Fairfax Ave., Los Angeles, CA 90036.

For more information and tickets, please visit: [www.openfist.org](http://www.openfist.org).