

A DUBLIN BLOOM: AN ORIGINAL FREE ADAPTATION OF JAMES JOYCE'S "ULYSSES," by Dermot Bolger. Dublin: New Island Books, 1995; London: Nick Hern Books, 1995. 112 pp. \$35.00. Performed and produced by the Glasgow Tron Theatre.
A JOURNEY ROUND JAMES JOYCE, by Andy Arnold. Unpublished. Performed and produced by the Glasgow Tron Theatre.

This spring saw the staging of two Joyce-themed dramatic productions in China—part of a program of events arranged under the aegis of a bilaterally agreed “Year of Cultural Exchange” between China and the United Kingdom. The plays came to the People’s Republic from Scotland, where Yi Liming, the director of Beijing’s Xinchuan Theatre, first saw a production of Dermot Bolger’s *Ulysses* at the Edinburgh Fringe in 2013.¹ This year’s Literary Theatre Exchange is in large part the fruit of the collaboration that followed between Yi and Andy Arnold, director of Bolger’s adaptation and artistic head of Glasgow’s Tron Theatre.

The first of these plays, entitled *A Journey Round James Joyce* and staged in Beijing and Shanghai, was written by Arnold with Chinese audiences specifically in mind.² The second, staged in Hangzhou, Shanghai, Beijing, and Jinan, is a revival of the Tron’s production of Bolger’s *Ulysses*.³

“Ten copies to Peking!”—such was Joyce’s delight on hearing, through Shakespeare and Company, that orders for his newly published book had been placed in the East.⁴ As the exclamation suggests, Joyce was keenly aware of the distances—linguistic and ideological as much as geographical—that his book had already begun to overcome by sparking interest in Beijing. As *Ulysses* makes clear, he was a sharp and witty observer of the clichés on which conceptions of far-flung countries are based. In one swift-moving paragraph of “Lotus-Eaters,” Leopold Bloom thinks about the Chinese as recipients of charity (“Save China’s millions”—*U* 5.326), targets for religious proselytizing (“the heathen Chinese”—*U* 5.326-27), eaters of opium, and worshippers of Buddha, also musing about the suitability of chopsticks as a Chinese counterpart to Ireland’s shamrock (*U* 5.327, 328, 330). Molly, for her part, thinks of China as a place where the day begins with the “combing out [of] pigtails” (*U* 18.1541).

If such examples comically show how decontextualized snapshots can come to stand for entire cultures, China’s rejection of Joyce for much of the twentieth century involved a similarly drastic process

of synecdochic simplification. For decades after its publication, the country's official line on Joyce (as well as on many other western artists) was one of straightforward condemnation. A rare review published in Shanghai in 1935 referred to *Ulysses* as both "notoriously obscene" and "notoriously abstruse"; with "its empty content" and "bizarre formal features," it was dismissed as having "nothing to do with literature."⁵ It is salutary to remember that such positions were by no means limited to China in the 1920s and 1930s: after all, China, unlike the United States and the United Kingdom, never imposed a legal ban on the book. But in China, such adamantly derogatory views endured for decades. The keynote speaker at the first Chinese celebration of Bloomsday in 1982 called Joyce "a master who has left a lasting mark in modern Western culture" but qualified the acknowledgement by stating that his sole "epistemological value" to Chinese readers resided in his diagnostic depiction of "the progressive deterioration of the bourgeois hero in the novel"; "Bloom's world," she continued, "is shocking in its pettiness, obscenity, ugliness, and confusion": *Ulysses* should be studied, she maintained, but only as a vivid example of western failure and depravity.⁶

Joyce's image in China has only recently begun to recover from such denigration. The first momentous change came in the 1990s when *Ulysses* finally became available to the country's readers in translation. Since then, China has been making up for lost time. In this context, the staging of *A Journey Round James Joyce* and *Ulysses* constitutes the latest in a series of milestones charting Joyce's rehabilitation as a figure worthy of both scholarly attention and general appreciation.

Devised by Arnold, *A Journey Round James Joyce* offers a theatrical exploration of—as the subtitle puts it—"a few moments in a writer's life."⁷ The story begins with Joyce and Nora Barnacle's meeting in Dublin and takes us with them on their journey to Trieste. Their experiences in the city are remembered as a rhythmical kaleidoscope of impecuniousness, language lessons, drunken riotousness, extra-marital flirtation, domestic strife, and literary creation. Although the tale is eminently familiar to Joyceans, its theatrical embodiment in China rendered it virtually unrecognizable. Performed in Chinese by Chinese actors, the play—a fascinating introduction to Joyce for its intended audience—was, for this rare western interloper, a thoroughly defamiliarizing experience. Indeed, as I watched the show, it struck me as highly unlikely that any non-Chinese-speaking person would be able to surmise that the spectacle was even about James Joyce, let alone fathom the detail of individual scenes. But the play's very foreignness, far from being a weakness, functioned as a stark and thought-provoking literalization of the extent of the cultural differences it was seeking to bridge.

The play is riveting for artistic reasons as well, its aesthetic minimal-

ism foremost among them. For one thing, the cast is small: besides the central couple, it features only "The Other Woman," "Everyman A," and "Everyman B," each of whom assumes a variety of different roles. The simple, elegant set evinces the same restraint, consisting principally of a gauzy dark grey screen which functions alternatively as an opaque backdrop and as a semi-transparent window onto distant, remembered, or imagined spaces. Props include only a lamppost, a doorway, and a desk. The same minimalism extends to the male characters' assortment of loosely fitting linen suits. Although presumably intended to convey a Chinese view of early-twentieth-century western dress, these in fact conspire, through their very oddity—one of the men wears a cream linen top hat and matching creased linen tails—to suggest a strange otherworldliness, as though the play were taking place somewhere between East and West. The bright outlandishness of the women's costumes—more evocative of flamenco dancing than of international train travel or daily life in Trieste—only adds to the dreamy, untethered feel of the piece. The lighting accentuates this surreal atmosphere: the dominant impression is of scenes rescued from a dense surrounding darkness. The slightly exaggerated cadences of the characters' speech and deportment, and the seamless transitions between scenes, further foster this phantasmal ambiance.

The play's heightened self-consciousness emphasizes this pronounced sense of rupture between the "real" world and the world of the stage. The piece begins with the actors—all as yet unknown to the audience—traversing the stage in mute and stylized slow-motion, as though rehearsing the elements of a gestural repertoire. The scene recalls the preamble to the "Sirens" episode of *Ulysses*, and the English script, which indicates that the cast should "gather on stage to the sound of orchestra tuning up," strongly suggests such a *clin d'oeil*. This incipient metatheatricality is foregrounded again when, towards the end of this overture, "Everyman A" turns to "Everyman B"—as a Vladimir might to an Estragon—and asks: "Women kaishi ba?" ("Shall we begin?"). The seeming reference to absurdism is confirmed by Joyce's later allusion to "our imaginary train," as well as by his response to a question about his experiences in the classroom: "happy days."

One of the most interesting aspects of the play, and a feature largely lost in the Chinese translation, is its linguistic fabric. The script is extensively—indeed, almost exclusively—made up of quotations from Joyce's writings: from *Dubliners*, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, and *Ulysses*, but also from his letters to Nora, his Triestine lectures and essays, and *Giacomo Joyce*. Although the implication of this method is that everything Joyce penned was autobiographically inspired, Arnold's collage of materials plays havoc with the interlocking chronologies of Joyce's life and writing: what the pervasive

splicing of quotations produces is an ingeniously resonant but always slightly distorted version of events.

The scene depicting arrival in Trieste, for example, sees Joyce subjected to a bizarrely stylized spanking at the hands of two sailors. In the following moments, the character's memories of being spanned as a child (excerpted verbatim from *A Portrait*) are heard in voice-over. These incongruously transplanted reminiscences give rise, in turn, to Joyce's statement that "[h]istory . . . is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake" (*U* 2.377). If he often speaks lines associated with Stephen Dedalus, he is also at times—as when he defines a nation as "the same people living in the same place"—a Bloomish figure (*U* 12.1422-23). The play's Nora is similarly versatile: though most frequently acting as a mouthpiece for versions of Molly's most famous lines ("Joyce? What sort of name is that when it's at home?" and "you're as good as another I suppose"⁸), she also briefly takes on the voice of Lily in *The Dead* ("The men of today is all palaver and what they can get out of you"⁹).

In its citational content and deliberate confusion of art and life, the play seems to function as a dream play, one that, like the "Circe" episode of *Ulysses*, albeit far more conservatively, plays on a constant sense of déjà-vu. In its portrayal of the "great man" in the mode of a pseudo-biographical intertextual whirligig, *A Journey* has much in common with Tom Stoppard's *Travesties*, in which the facts of Joyce's life in Zurich during World War I are altered to produce a Wildean festival of romantic and artistic high-jinks.¹⁰ Yet the tenor of *A Journey* is far less carnivalesque, and far less witty, than Stoppard's play, its tonal palette ranging from broad physical comedy (Nora emptying a saucepan over Joyce's head) to drama (Joyce addressing a vision of his dead mother) to melodrama (Joyce, in a moment of creative inspiration, gazing open-mouthed into the precincts of his own mind).

Arnold's *Ulysses*, staged in Beijing within China's monumental National Centre for Performing Arts (colloquially known as "the Giant Egg" for its distinctive shape), is on the surface a very different kind of play. For one thing, it was performed by Irish actors with Chinese surtitles and, as such, took its Beijing audience much further out of its comfort zone, while conversely bringing this isolated western spectator back into hers.¹¹ But there were other striking contrasts: the stage of *Ulysses* is far more crowded and far more brightly lit; its characters are louder; and their actions flaunt the body's needs and urges in a way *A Journey* does not.

Joyceans will inevitably detect some problems with the production. These fall into two main categories. Some are what one might call "errors of fact." For example, since Stephen is clearly not in mourning in the scene representing the "Telemachus" episode—he wears a red shirt and tweed waistcoat—his objection to Buck Mulligan's offer

to loan him a pair of grey trousers is nonsensical. The second set of problems might be grouped together under the rubric of “interpretative false notes.” It is jarring, to say the least, to hear Bloom erupt into loud mocking laughter on discovering that Gerty is lame. Similarly, Molly’s almost hysterical delivery of certain sections of her soliloquy seems far removed from the silent, reflective interiority with which Joyce’s book actually concludes. Halfway through the play’s concluding set piece, slow piano music is introduced from somewhere off-stage, signaling a transition from histrionic distress to sentimentality. As the lights go down, Molly kneels on the bed facing the audience, arms raised in a posture recalling the crucifixion motif established at the end of the “Cyclops” scene, when Bloom assumed a similar stance. This gestural choice, as well as her final, heartbroken “yes,” go markedly against the grain of the affirmation commonly associated with the word. However surprising or awkward they may seem to readers deeply versed in Joyce’s text, such departures are rightly the prerogative of any playwright or director involved in adapting a work to the stage. And it seems especially apposite to let go of the shibboleth of punctilious fidelity in China, in relation to performances marking so significant an advance in Joyce’s acceptance in the country.

That is not to say that this *Ulysses* did not present its Chinese spectators with challenges of a different order. Watching the boisterous display put on by the Tron Theatre in “the Giant Egg,” it seemed to me unlikely that anyone unacquainted with Joyce’s book would be able to make sense of this fast-spinning carousel of vignettes. Indeed, the Chinese friends with whom I saw the play were not a little flummoxed.¹² The lack of connection between scenes, the seeming absence of any overarching narrative, and the difficulty of telling characters apart from each other (as in *A Journey*, the same actors play many different parts, some of them involving cross-dressing) were far more baffling than was the play’s foregrounding of sexual and bodily functions. This perplexity, however, was the less resented for being wholly expected—Joyce’s reputation for impenetrability, in China as elsewhere, tends to precede any actual encounter with his works.

Amid this spirited confusion, the production’s occasional acknowledgement of the specificity of its Chinese audience was much appreciated. Spectators were audibly delighted by the incorporation into Molly’s soliloquy of a line in Chinese (“Nanrenmen dou ji”—“Men are all too quick to come”), as well as by her reference to people in China “combing out their pigtailed for the day.” They also laughed with abandon when Bloom was referred to in the “Circe” scene as being of “Mongolian extraction,” a phrase evidently bearing quite different connotations in China—where it primarily has the ring of a joke about a neighboring people—than it does in the West.¹³

Like all adaptors, Bolger and Arnold set themselves an impossible

mission—that of pleasing audiences divided between those who know and those who do not know the original text. But they rise to the task with ambition and daring, and their *Ulysses*, and Arnold's *A Journey Round James Joyce*, were met in China with the warm welcome they deserve.

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NOTES

¹ Originally commissioned by Philadelphia's Rosenbach Museum in the early 1990s (when Joyce's works briefly came out of copyright), Dermot Bolger's *Ulysses* adaptation was first performed as a reading (directed by Greg Doran of the Royal Shakespeare Company) in Philadelphia on 16 June 1994. In a review of the event, Marian Eide deemed "Bolger's interpretive adaptation" to have "accomplished the impossible"—see Eide, "Bloomsday at the Rosenbach Museum, 16 June 1994," *JJQ*, 31 (Summer 1994), 436. The uncertain copyright situation in those years extinguished hopes of a fully acted performance being staged in London in 1995. Nonetheless, Bolger's script was published in an edition of 250 copies later that same year under the title *A Dublin Bloom: An Original Free Adaptation of James Joyce's "Ulysses"* (Dublin: New Island Books, 1995; London: Nick Hern Books, 1995). Andy Arnold's production of *Ulysses* is based on a revised version of this text. The play received its first full-fledged dramatic première in Glasgow in October 2012, and the production subsequently went on tour, visiting Belfast, Dublin, and Cork in October and November of the same year. It was this production, revived at the Edinburgh Fringe in the summer of 2013, that caught Yi Liming's attention. The staging of *Ulysses* in China is the subject of *James Joyce Goes to China*, a sixty-minute documentary film directed by Ian Madden and scheduled to air on BBC Four in the spring of 2016.

² *A Journey Round James Joyce* was performed in Beijing's China Millennium Monument Theatre on 2 and 3 April and in Shanghai's Grand Theatre on 10 and 11 April 2015.

³ *Ulysses* was performed in Hangzhou's Triumph Theatre on 27 and 28 March, in Shanghai's Dramatic Arts Centre on 31 March and 1 April, in Beijing's National Centre for Performing Arts on 4, 5, and 6 April, and in Jinan's Shandong Province Grand Theatre on 10 and 11 April 2015.

⁴ See Mary T. Reynolds, "Joyce's Interest in Translation and China," *Shamrocks and Chopsticks: James Joyce in China: A Tale of Two Encounters*, ed. Jin Di (Hong Kong: City Univ. of Hong Kong Press, 2001), p. 11. Reynolds's essay is an abridged version of a paper given in Beijing-Tianjin in July 1996, at the First International Academic Conference.

⁵ "James Joyce," "Free Talks," *Shenbao Daily*, (6 May 1935), n.p., and quoted in *Shamrocks and Chopsticks* (pp. 17-18).

⁶ These comments by the otherwise unidentified speaker at the 1982 Bloomsday celebration are included in a commentary by Jin Di in his *Shamrocks and Chopsticks* (p. 46).

⁷ I am grateful to Arnold for allowing me to see the script of the play. The English text was translated into Chinese by Zhao Han.

⁸ See “Yes. Who’s he when he’s at home?” and “as well him as another” (*U* 4.340, 18.1604-05).

⁹ “The men that is now is only all palaver and what they can get out of you” (*D* 178).

¹⁰ Tom Stoppard, *Travesties* (London: Faber and Faber, 1974).

¹¹ The English text was translated into Chinese surtitles by Ruan Jian.

¹² I am grateful to Li Hongxia and Yang Wenyan for sharing their views of both plays and to Li Hongxia for her help with innumerable acts of linguistic and cultural translation.

¹³ “His submission is that he is of Mongolian extraction and irresponsible for his actions” (*U* 15.954-55).