

A Short History of Bloomsday in Melbourne

Before 1994, various groups in the city were reading Joyce informally, most notably Collected Works Bookshop, and that, happily, still occurs.

Bloomsday in Melbourne began at 8am on 16 June 1994 at the State Library of Victoria with a breakfast of Kidneys. It was an offshoot of the Yeats Society of Victoria, but within 18 months, it became its own entity, dedicated to Joyce and his contemporaries.

Because *Ulysses* is so much set in the streets, early Bloomsdays involved a great number of street theatre events. Since 2004, Bloomsday patrons became too numerous and the difficulties of working in the streets so beset with by-laws that Bloomsday patrons now tend to congregate in theatre venues for the annual play, seminar and dinner.

In the early years, the organisers tried to find venues in Melbourne that were reminiscent of Dublin. The two cities share many resemblances: they sit athwart bays; they were colonised by the British; they have a range of similar institutions; public buildings have a similar opulence, though for different reasons, though they emerged out of quite different histories.

Bloomsday often explored different neighbourhoods (e.g., St. Kilda and Williamstown, the legal precinct and the cemetery), and elicited interesting parallel histories. Not only did *Ulysses* live more vividly for us, but so too did the city of Melbourne itself, and its amazing architecture and hidden pockets. All sorts of institutions welcomed us: churches, theatres, bookshops, town halls, libraries, even Parliament. The precincts were often quite arcane, eg., Melbourne's first morgue at Williamstown became the venue for the Black Mass in Circe; the Legion of Mary in North Melbourne was a splendid location for the Marian passages from Nausicaa; the Trades Hall became the site of an investigation into Joyce's attitude to work; and the Museum of Victoria for Joyce's take on Modernity. Latterly, we've enjoyed the amenities of theatres like fortyfivedownstairs (Flinders Lane Melbourne), and the Melba Spiegeltent (Collingwood).

There has always been a theme to explore: e.g, how did Joyce court scandal? How did he mobilise Homer? With what kind of music did he populate his text? What does he have to say about Irish nationalism? About women? About smells? About Modernity, or Cinema? Entire Bloomsdays have been preoccupied with such intriguing matters. You can follow our journey of discovery since [1994](#) by going to our archive in the menu bar above.

From the start, Bloomsday has been a collaboration between Joyceans and actors, as it quickly became obvious to us that Joyce is more accessible to the ear than the eye. The Bloomsday players commit annually to demystifying the novel, pointing up the comedy, the high seriousness, the parodies and the wickedly subversive, emancipatory politics and thinking. Performances usually take the shape of fully mounted plays, but have also included films, a film competition, oratorios, and even a ballet.

Bloomsday prides itself on mounting original scripts, and fresh ones annually. These may be based on an aspect of the novel, or focus on a chapter, or turn related scenes into a coherent production. Sometimes Bloomsday invents scenarios which allow an exploration of a particular theory or set of ideas. For example, in 2009, Wilde about Joyce put Joyce and Wilde in literary Purgatory in order to contrast their respective approaches to Art, explore Joyce's tribute to Oscar, and the intriguing topic of homophobic panic. The scriptwriting team seems never to be short of ideas and new angles on Joyce, and script-writing and script development with actors are among the most seductive pleasures of mounting Bloomsday for the organisers.

Deemed by the *New York Times* as one of the top five Bloomsdays internationally in 2002, one of the highlights of Bloomsday was being commissioned by the James Joyce Centre in Dublin to perform *Her Singtime Sung*, a theatrical piece on Joyce's women (both real-life and fictional) in Dublin in 2004 at the Re-Joyce 2004 Festival. We invite both aficionados and novices to join us for a Bloomsday soon. You will be surprised by the professionalism of its theatre, and the joy we derive from making theatre out of the text patrons report to be infectious.

To read about Bloomsdays since 1994, each one a distinctive and different analysis and theatrical celebration of an aspect of Joyce's corpus of novels, go to the reports in the Archive of this site, where you'll find detailed accounts of a quarter-of-a-century's immersion in Joyce-inspired theatricals, seminars and other events in Melbourne, Dublin and Kobe.