

Love's Bitter Mystery: The Year That Made James Joyce

By Steve Carey

Our show is a biographical piece, reflecting on ways James Joyce mined his own early twenties for his fiction; and fictionalised it, too. Is what we're watching fiction? Memory? Biographical fact? Speculation? Or something else entirely?

We remember Joyce as an exile, a citizen of Europe who died with Ireland written on his heart. But Joyce had a failed first attempt, too, a few months in Paris that ended when he was summoned back to Dublin because his mother was dying. The year that followed – 1903-1904 – was miserable, not just because he was witnessing his mother's life ebbing away, but also because he felt his own freedom and potential ebbing, too. Excluded because of his poverty and his bad manners from literary circles, unable to make significant progress with his own writings and increasingly alienated from his hearty medical chum Oliver St John Gogarty (immortalised and calumnified in *Ulysses* as Buck Mulligan), he kicked around town.

Well, that's one interpretation. Another is that this was a crucial period in his development, as a writer but more importantly as a man. He and his mother had a very close relationship, but he felt trapped by everything she represented: family, conventional morality, religion, duty. She taught him what it is to love – but in a cruel way, it took her death to free him to love her without being bound by everything she demanded from him.

Miserable with grief, poverty and the lack of any apparent future, Joyce's fortunes took a turn for the better when in June 1904 he met a young woman on the streets of Dublin. Nora Barnacle had achieved so much that Joyce had failed to achieve: exile – for her, from Galway, and escape to the big city – and not only financial independence but an independence of behaviour, too. Joyce knew plenty of virginal women, such as his sisters and the unattainable young women at university. And he knew sexually experienced women, in the form of the prostitutes he was visiting. What he didn't know was anyone like Nora, sexually confident, experienced and free of hang ups.

His mother taught him what it is to love; his Nora showed him how.

This play owes much to Richard Ellmann's magnificent and indispensable biography of Joyce, as well as to Joyce's own fiction, specifically *Dubliners*, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, its early draft version *Stephen Hero* and of course *Ulysses*, which is haunted by the ghoul of Stephen's mother and illuminated by the very physical Marion Bloom (and MARION is, of course, an anagram of I'M NORA). It also owes a significant debt to the Joycean knowledge, dramatic experience and encouragement of Bloomsday's Artistic Director, Frances Devlin-Glass.

In some ways, with *Love's Bitter Mystery* Bloomsday in Melbourne is returning to its rootless roots, its itinerant past. While in recent years we've settled into fortyfivedownstairs and other excellent, traditional theatre spaces, earlier in our history we've taken Joyce to the streets and to all kinds of unusual places and spaces. This year, we've found a setting that beautifully matches the mood of the piece: cold and damp, like the miserable attic Joyce found himself in in Paris; but grand and dramatic, like Joyce himself and his own father, once rich but now reduced to moonlight flits to avoid the rent. In fact, Villa Alba was built in the very year Joyce was born, 1882. It offers a unique opportunity for you to witness Joyce, his mother, his girl and others up close and personal. Instead of being seated and the

other side of a proscenium, you're in the room where it happened. It's intimate, confronting, moving and poignant.

We invite you to join us for *Love's Bitter Mystery: The Year That Made James Joyce*.

Villa Alba, A Spectacular Set for *Love's Bitter Mystery*



Detail of drawing room ceiling

Villa Alba Museum is a lavishly decorated Italianate mansion created around 1882-4. It was created by the leading decorating firm Paterson Brothers and features elaborately painted ceilings and walls with *trompe l'oeil* being utilised on a grand scale. In the vestibule, it features two unique forty-foot panoramic murals of marine views of Sydney and Edinburgh which are of national significance. The R. J. Hamer Heritage Garden has been reinstated in its late Victorian form, with plants that feature in contemporary nursery catalogues, and if you're visiting for a daytime session of the play, it is certainly worth enjoying.



The house has a chequered history: the mansion itself began to take its current form in 1882, converting and expanding a single story house, which existed in 1870 and was greatly expanded by the Greenlaw family. These renovations resulted in the Italianate mansion we see today. The Patterson brothers favoured murals in place of wallpaper and these are the

glory of the house being on a grand scale. The structure was complemented by the latest aesthetic and artistic furnishings from around the world, some of which survives. The fortunes of the Greenlaw family were severely impacted by the 1890s crash and he became insolvent, with Mrs Greenlaw needing to sell up some of the contents after his death in 1895. She remained in the house until it passed to Samuel Fripp, and eventually in 1950 to the Royal Women's Hospital. It was used as a home for nurses, and many of the murals were painted over 'to brighten it up' and you will see on the doors, remnants of this era of

the house. In 1999, it changed hands again, this time to the Jesuits who leased the land to the east of the house for their early Learning Centre at Burke Hall.

Meanwhile, Kew Council in 1983 established the Villa Alba Preservation Committee, charged with managing and restoring the house. It sings with a huge variety of painted, stencilled and gilded decoration. At the end of the long hall, one enters the Vestibule where the detailed murals featuring Edinburgh and Sydney Harbour (the birthplaces of the original owners of the house) have been painstakingly restored inch by inch, and at great cost. A set designer has been at work on these. There are some wonderful surprises in the armorial bearings above the doors, especially the ones alluding to Australia, with Australiana jostling for attention with putti in the hall. The literary friezes in the Dining Room feature Sir Walter Scott's *Waverley* novels, with a hint of medievalism in the dado. In the Drawing Room, there's a little shrine to *Romeo and Juliet* and *Midsummer Night's Dream*, so our Shakespeareans will be right at home. The blue-glass Venetian chandelier is a recent proud addition to the house.



The western end of the vestibule.

We thank the Villa Alba board, and Andrew Dixon in particular, for the warmth of their welcome and for enabling the use of the mansion for *Love's Bitter Mystery*. You will undoubtedly want to return to examine the house at your leisure, and Villa Alba kindly plans to invite Bloomsday play-goers to a special viewing later in the year. Meanwhile, pull out a warm coat and enjoy the special ambience of this unique grand house and witness how it becomes a very special and superior set for our play.