Making Things Happen

by Dermot Bolger*

Things don't happen: things are made to happen
By those people who choose to remain unseen;

By those who look at a boarded-up building
And reimagine it as a brimming theatre;

Who gaze at a loose configuration of streets
And see them come together as a village;

Whose names never feature in the headlines,
Being neither seekers of attention or acclaim,

But whose intuition concurs with Leopold Bloom
That revolutions occur on the instalments due plan.

If it is true that Balthasar, Melchior and Caspar
Did arrive, anxious to brandish flashy gifts

Of gold, myrrh and frankincense, it is only because
Someone behind the scene possessed the sense

To saddle camels and point out exactly which star
To follow, someone made that epic voyage feasible,

Then retreated to the margins, far too immersed
In making new things happen to take a curtain call

At the encore, when kings theatrically bow their heads
In a stable, having only somehow made it there on time

Because unobtrusive gods flitted through the cosmos,
Orchestrating that darkness to let the star shine.

* Irish playwright, poet and writer.

*In*Verbis, n. 2, 2021, pp. 13-20

ISSN 2279-8978

Adapting *Ulysses* for the stage

Although James Joyce was born in 1882 into relative comfort in the middle-class Dublin suburb of Rathgar, his father's drinking and spendthrift ways meant that Joyce's childhood was punctuated by numerous moves. Initially, as Joyce's brother recalled, "two floats [wagons] were needed, but eventually one was enough" to transport the family's meagre possessions to addresses that reflected ever diminishing circumstances.

Joyce stood out at UCD for his intellectual brilliance and independence of thought. Aged 21, he briefly fled to Paris before being summoned home by news that his mother was dying. In mourning and penury he drifted around Dublin until – as all readers of his great book knows – on June 16th, 1904, he went walking with Nora Barnacle, a young Galway chambermaid in Finn's Hotel. This encounter felt so significant that Joyce spent much of his next eighteen years recreating Dublin on that exact date in his masterpiece, *Ulysses*. He persuaded Nora to run away to Europe, embarking on the perilous adventure of life together, firstly in Trieste, where he exhaustingly taught English, and then in Paris where he finished *Ulysses*.

Publication of his works often involved battles: the original publisher of *Dubliners* was so scandalised by its realistic portrayal of Dublin that he burnt the first edition rather than let readers' souls be corrupted. In 1922 Sylvia Beach, who had recently opened a bookstore, Shakespeare and Company, in Paris, established her own publishing company just to see *Ulysses* into print.

While the book brought acclaim, Joyce's final years were filled with anxiety for his daughter, Lucia, diagnosed as schizophrenic. In 1940 the Joyces fled Paris before the Nazis arrived. In Jan 1941 he died in Zurich after an operation for an ulcerated duodenum and was buried there in a simple non-religious ceremony. Nora, his great love and muse, died a decade later.

In 1924 Joyce wrote in a notebook: "*Today 16 of June 20 years after. Will anyone remember this date?*" He needn't have worried. His extraordinary novel remains universally celebrated, surrounded by a mystique that is a blessing and a curse, as readers can feel too intimidated by its reputation to read it. I'm not diminishing its profound complexity, but during their early years of poverty, Molly complained about him keeping her awake, by laughing aloud to himself as he sat up at night writing it.

If readers feel daunted at the prospect of reading *Ulysses*, imagine my trepidation at being asked to transpose Joyce's masterpiece of 265,000 words – in 18 episodes alternating through a dazzling array of linguistic styles – for the stage. The original challenge came again in a strange way. No time is more dangerous for a phone call than just after you have had dinner on a quiet Monday evening when your thoughts are tuned to nothing more daunting than the washing the dishes and a last football kick around in the park. If your phone rings on a Monday, never answer it: it's invariably somebody asking you to do something you don't want to do and maybe even shouldn't do, but you will definitively end up doing.

One Monday evening in 1993 the highly respected English theatre director, Greg Doran – now the artistic director of the Royal Shakespeare Company – phoned me to say that he had recently staged Derek Walcott's acclaimed version of *The Odyssey* and wanted to follow this up with a stage version James Joyce's masterpiece *Ulysses*.

I explained on the phone why I would never attempt this near impossible task. I explained my reasons again over lunch, after he flew into Dublin to see me. I was still explaining why I wouldn't consider it when – in one of those metamorphoses that occur between the main course and coffee – I started drawing diagrams on my napkins to show how it might be staged.

I was discussing the most immediate theatrical problem which was Molly's soliloquy. This would make (and has made) a brilliant one woman show in itself, but in danger of unbalancing any adaptation. However this gave me a clue towards reimagining the novel as a play. What if I started at the end: with Bloom falling asleep in bed beside Molly? He could be led back through the day's events in his sleep, by characters who change at the drop of a hat, instantaneously transporting him to different locations inside the illogical logic of a dream. Therefore "real time" is when Bloom sleeps and Molly lies awake, agitated by her torrent of thoughts. This allows her soliloquy to punctuate the play, breaking up (and retrospectively speculating upon) the episodes her sleeping husband relives.

As Greg departed for London, I stood outside the restaurant, feeling palpable terror, because in explaining how it couldn't be done, I had somehow agreed to transpose Joyce's masterpiece into a play, due to have a staged reading in a 1,300 seat Philadelphia theatre the following Bloomsday. But then I realized that my terror at approaching it as a playwright reflected the terror many readers feel at approaching it as a book. *Ulysses* has a deserved mystique. Nobody could call it an

easy read. Joyce joked about wanting to keep critics busy for centuries. Ninety years on, he remains on track, with an industry surrounding the book. Much of what is written laudably attempts to open up then book's myriad meanings. But some criticism is so abstruse as to place barriers around it being simply enjoyed as a novel.

Therefore my starting point was Nora's complaint that Joyce kept her awake, laughing while writing it. I quickly realised why Joyce laughed at subtly getting under the skin and prejudices of the claustrophobic Dublin that Stephen feels he must flee from. Joyce's writing teems with brilliant virtuosity, but also with insights into the human condition that remain equally true today. What impressed me most as a reader scared me as a playwright. Joyce not only created remarkable characters in all their contradictions, but *Ulysses* expands to encompass an entire city. It is devoid of minor characters, because Joyce conjures entire lives for people who appear only fleetingly.

Such expansiveness is a privilege of fiction, with subplots forming the common bedrock characters spring from. A play cannot be as expansive. An audience will follow a playwright anywhere, once they are being propelled forward by the engine of curiosity. If the plot overly digresses that spell is punctured.

One difficulty about adapting *Ulysses* is that it could expand into fifty plays. Superb dramas could be conjured from the disastrous marriage of Blood's former belle, Josie Breen or the delusional life of Bloom's clandestine erotic correspondent, Martha. I needed to focus on two journeys that being together a cuckolded, ridiculed man (who has lost a son but never loses his humanity) and a young man estranged from his own father, intent of true independence by refusing to let any physical, nationalist, religious or moral boundary limit his intellectual freedom. No playwright can match Joyce's gargantuan vision. I could only hope those elements which fascinated me might intrigue an audience.

I feel an enormous debt of gratitude to Greg Doran for suggesting that I adapt the novel at a time when the book had briefly lapsed out of copyright in 1994 before the European Union standardised its copyright laws, with countries like Ireland and Britain (where copyright previously lapsed after fifty years from the death of the writer) adopting the European norm of seventy years from the death of the writer. This meant that the play's original "opening night" in Dublin in late 1995 was very different from its later opening night in the Abbey Theatre production, directed by Graham McLaren in 2017, not least because the 1995 "opening night" occurred at 9.45 a.m. in a

deserted theatre and – as the Abbey contains 492 seats – this means that 490 more people were present the second time around.

As I say, my problem in 1995 was that – due to a harmonization of the European Union's law on copyright – *Ulysses*, which has fallen out of copyright in 1991, was suddenly about to go back into copyright until 2011. Therefore the adaptation, which I commenced with such trepidation and expectation two years before, and which Greg and I had possessed so may plans – now seemed likely to disappear forever into a dusty folder under my bed, due to objections from the Joyce estate.

My original plan in 1995 was that – on the day before the book went back not copyright – I would invite a specially invited audience, consisting of two people and a dog, to at least have seen the script read in Ireland once. However the wonderfully talented cast in 1995 – who included Olwen Fouéré as Molly and who all happily gave up their morning for free – advised me wise to work with animals or children. Therefore we just invited two men to listen to what I genuinely believed would be the first and last performance of my adaptation of *Ulysses* in Ireland, so that I could at least say that it had happened once.

This deliberate sparse audience back in 1995 was no reflection on the quality of the adaption. While no playwright can judge their own work, the fact that my adaption has in recent years enjoyed acclaimed productions in Britain and America and toured China, suggests that it captures at least something of the majesty and rich humanity of Joyce's masterpiece.

Sixteen years would pass from it getting lost amid the odd socks and dusty paperbacks that acuminate under writers' beds and its rediscovery by Andy Arnold of Glasgow's Tron Theatre. A wonderful inventive and brilliant director, Andy was toying with the idea of asking someone to try and adapt Ulysses for the stage when our paths metaphysical crossed and I was able to use a line normally only used by the presenters of cookery programmes on television: "Here is one that I made in the oven earlier."

Andy and I hoovered off the dust that that covered the script during its long sojourn under my bed and a wonderful adventure began, with the Tron doing a truly vibrant production of it with a mixture of Irish and Scottish actors, which played Glasgow, Belfast, Dublin and Cork in 2012. In 2013 the Tron took it to the Edinburgh International Theatre Festival and in 2014 they took it on a tour of China, which was fascinating for all kinds of reasons. Firstly, each Chinse city seemed to have its own censor and so certain lines that

were allowed in one performance had to be dropped in another. But, secondly BBC Scotland made a documentary about the tour and it was fascinating to see young Chinese audiences interact with the play and then Andy later interact with them in workshops where they create4d their own mini cameos of Dublin life.

After my adaptation toured China in 2014 that seemed the end of the journey and a rather glorious ending too. A playwright's career has many peaks and troughs, ambitions you achieve and ambitions you need to let go on. One afternoon in 2016 I was passed the Abbey Theatre with my two sons when they asked if I'd ever had a play on in there.

"No," I replied. "I've had plays staged in Dublin in the Gate Theatre and the Project Theatre and the Axis and Civic theatres and four or five in the Peacock Theatre, which is a smaller theatre that is part of the Abbey building and many plays in many theatres in cities around the world, but I've never had never on the main Abbey stage. I always wanted to, and indeed there was once a controversial commissioned play that was due to go on, which we needed to pull on legal advice, but my chance has now passed and I am totally reconciled to that."

Two weeks later, the new directors who had just taken over at the Abbey Theatre, Graham McLaren and Neil Murray, phoned me to ask me to pop in for a chat. I'd no idea what they wanted and no expectations. It turned out that they wanted permission to stage a new version of my *Ulysses* on the main Abbey stage as part of the 2017 Dublin Theatre Festival. When I walked outside ten minutes later, I leaned against the wall and laughed before I phoned my sons with the news, because while I had given up on my dream, apparently my dream hadn't given up on me.

The Tron production had been wonderful inventive and now in the Abbey Graham McLaren picked up the baton, with a totally different and equally brilliantly innovative reimagining of it. I couldn't even begin to thank the array of talents – from actors and musical directors to set designers and puppet makers – who brought it to life in this new incarnation, which was so successful that it returned to the Abbey for a second run in 2018, but I salute and truly appreciate their passion, commitment and creativity.

As I write this today in 2021 theatres have lain empty for over a year and it is hard to imagine 492 people happily packed into a theatre, but even if the long journey may be over for my adaptation, let's hope that the unique experience will soon be enjoyed again by audiences and actors and the unseen backstage crew who make the magic happen.

My relationship with *Ulysses* has changed over time. I first read *Ulysses* as a schoolboy too young to understand Bloom. When I first looked at adapting it, for that 1994 staged reading in America, he was my contemporary in age – 38 to my 36. Reimagining it for the Abbey Theatre at the age of 58, I envied his relative youth and remained enamored by his steadfastness in clinging to his principles amid public ridicule. One by one he slays his dragons in ways so subtle they barely notice his victories.

For decades Dubliners argued over whose statue should replace Nelson's pillar in Dublin's O'Connell Street. I love how the Dublin Spire – which stands in the place of that demolished pillar – commemorates no single self-appointed hero. The Spire is where young Dubliners meet, a site of friendships made and farewells taken, a commemorative backdrop to everyone's life. But if I could pick an inscription for it, I'd use Bloom's words to Stephen when they amiably agree to disagree about life. Bloom says: "*I resent violence or intolerance in any shape or form. A revolution must come on the due installments plan. All these wretched quarrels, supposed to be about honour and flags. It's money at the back of everything, greed and jealousy*."

Bloom strikes me as a different type of Irish patriot – even if the drinkers in Barney Kiernan's pub don't regard him as truly Irish – because he is a Jew of Hungarian descent – in the same way as there are some people today still refuse to regard Irish citizens of Asian or African descent as truly Irish. He the sort of patriot who does essential, unglamorous things, like starting credit unions, because a nation is built by the due installments plan. As a writer I'm proud to share the same city as Joyce. As a citizen I'm proud to share the same city as Bloom – the cuckolded husband, the lecher after shapely ankles, the father carrying bereavement in his heart, the son who understands the silent taboo of suicide, the lowly advertisement agent, regularly sacked because of his opinions, who suffers humiliations but remains steadfast amidst his contradictions.

My ideal audience for any future staging of my adaptation are people who always wanted to read *Ulysses* but felt daunted. They may be surprised to find that it remains a book about themselves and people they know. Audiences won't leave knowing everything about *Ulysses*, no more than I'll ever comprehend the fullness of Joyce's vision, no matter how often I read his novel. But I hope they are sufficient engaged by its human dramas – Bloom's subtle triumphs; Molly's all too human contradictions and Stephen's isolation – to once again begin to read this superb chronicle of our capital city: one of the

greatest and truest novels of all time, whose author I salute and in front of whom I stand in awe.