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From the Selected Works of Matthew Spangler

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Reviewed Work: The Parable of the Plums by Brian Fleming, Raymond Keane, Bisi Adigun

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upbeat, least of all a dance. At the end of Complicite's *Measure*, Isabella's silence was surprising, given Frederick's verbal facility in pleading for the lives of both her brother early in the play and his would-be executioner at the end. This production used that silence to underscore Isabella's ultimate powerlessness. In the shocking dual moment when the Duke reveals both his craftiness (at keeping Isabella's brother alive) and his lust for Isabella (and in this production, it was lust), the show came to an absolute, silent standstill. Isabella's shock was palpable and clearly not related to seeing her brother raised from the dead, but rather to the lack of an escape route for herself. She remained in an attitude of shock as the Duke continued his business of arranging marriages all around. At the final moment of the play, there was one more reveal. The Duke said, "What's mine is yours," then, with an ominous change in tone, "and what is yours is mine." While saying this line, he gestured upstage, where the scrim flew out to reveal the full vastness of the theatre. In the distance was a small white room containing only one thing: a bed, with a red rose on a pillow. As the lights faded, Isabella was left gasping and choking, desperately trying to find words with which to respond to a proposal that left her with neither choice nor voice.

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THE PARABLE OF THE PLUMS. Adapted from James Joyce's *Ulysses*. Directed by Brian Fleming, Raymond Keane, and Bisi Adigun. Millennium Spire, O'Connell Street, Dublin. 16 June 2004.

The process of transforming a work of literature from the page to the stage is fraught with complex issues of representation. Most writers and directors of stage adaptations strive for fidelity to the original source, but often there is disagreement about exactly how this fidelity should be achieved. Some argue that performances of literature should represent the text as literally as possible, while others argue that it is, in fact, more faithful to represent the spirit of the text, even if that means changing some of its particularities. *The Parable of the Plums*, a theatrical representation of the Aeolus chapter of

James Joyce's *Ulysses*, boldly embraced the second of these arguments. Performed in Dublin as part of Bloomsday, an annual celebration of Joyce's fiction held on 16 June, *The Parable of the Plums* did more than simply represent Joyce's text; this performance also made a powerful statement about contemporary race relations and Irish identity.

Named after the protagonist of *Ulysses*, Leopold Bloom, Bloomsday features hundreds of performances of Joyce's works in pubs, restaurants, parks, on street corners, and professional stages. This particular Bloomsday marked the centenary of the events of *Ulysses*, which are set in Dublin on 16 June 1904. *The Parable of the Plums* was the largest Bloomsday performance since the festival began fifty years ago, with 170 amateur and professional performers on the stage and several thousand people in the audience. But more importantly, it was groundbreaking and transgressive as a work of Irish street theatre. First, because the performance contained no spoken text, relied exclusively on music and dance, and was a collaborative effort in its construction, *The Parable of the Plums* broke with the tradition of Irish theatre in general, which tends to privilege the text and the individual author as creator. It also broke with the tradition of Bloomsday performances in particular, which are typically word-for-word readings taken directly from Joyce's texts. Second, the organizers recruited performers from Dublin's inner-city Asian and West African communities. Given the recent surge in anti-immigrant sentiment in Dublin, coupled with a public referendum passed five days before the performance that prevents children of foreign-born parents from receiving Irish citizenship, the inclusion of Asian and West African actors in a performance of *Ulysses* possessed a powerful, contemporary message: like it or not, the color of Dublin is no longer exclusively white. Moreover, given the novel's current status in Ireland as a national treasure, a performance of *Ulysses* is also a performance of Irish identity, and to insert people of color into such a performance is a radical, though demographically accurate, gesture.

The Parable of the Plums was staged in the center of O'Connell Street near the spot where Nelson's Pillar once stood. The pillar, a forty-meter-high column with a statue of the British Admiral Lord Horatio Nelson on its top, was seen by many as an unwelcome symbol of British colonization. It was damaged by an IRA bomb in 1966 and torn down soon after. The pillar has since been replaced by the Millennium Spire (erected in 2003), a stainless-steel, needle-shaped monolith that extends 120 meters into the sky. A raised stage approximately fifty feet long and fifteen feet wide stood at the base



Arambe Theatre Company taking part in *Parable of the Plums*, Bloomsday 2004, Dublin.
Photo: Phillip Massey.

of the spire. Towering over the stage, the silver spire looked straight out of Disney's Tomorrowland and made it impossible to ignore contemporary Dublin, much less imagine Edwardian Dublin, the setting for the performance's opening scene. But the fact that the performance took place in the shadow of a highly visible reminder of contemporary urban life served to underscore the theme of a changing city, a central theme in this performance.

The Parable of the Plums began at eight o'clock in the evening, rather than at noon when the chapter is set in the novel, for to block off traffic on O'Connell Street in the middle of the day would surely cripple the city—a point that further emphasized the fact that this performance took place in a modern metropolis and not the seemingly small town described in Joyce's fiction. Some organizers expressed disappointment at not being able to perform at the exact time that the events occur in the novel. But on this particular evening, the setting sun cast an orange glow over the street and the warm, almost balmy weather—highly unusual for Dublin—ultimately benefited the performance. Due to the weather, successful publicity, and the fact that the performance was free, several thousand people turned up, tightly packing the small street,

and many in the audience spent the performance jostling for position along three sides of the rectangular stage. The fourth side was flush against a high curtain that provided a backdrop for the musicians. As is the case with many street spectacles, those with the best view seemed to enjoy it the most.

The performance opened with an actor playing Admiral Nelson raised on the platform of a hydraulic lift to the height of the curtain backdrop, while two large puppets stood below. Stephen Dedalus, the novel's coprotagonist, tells a story about two Dublin women who climb the spiral staircase to the top of Nelson's Pillar, where they eat juicy plums and spit the stones out onto the street below. The two puppets at the foot of the platform represented the women from Stephen's story, which he calls "A Pisgah Sight of Palestine or the Parable of the Plums," and from which the performance took its title. Two city trams, composed of cardboard and propelled by actors on stilts walking inside the cardboard skeletons, crossed the stage. One resembled a tram from Edwardian Dublin and the other a modern tram scheduled to begin service by the end of the summer. The modern tram was the first indication that

the performance would not be a literal representation of Joyce's text, but would include contemporary references. Other actors circled the stage playing the roles of newspaper boys shouting out the headlines: "Terrible tragedy in Rathmines!" "A child bit by a bellows!" These were the only lines from *Ulysses* included in the performance, in part because the decision was made early on to do a physical and visual piece of theatre, but more practically, because Stephen Joyce, James Joyce's grandson and executor of the estate, forbids almost all public performances of his grandfather's work. (The majority of Bloomsday performances, therefore, happen illicitly.) The newspaper boys then danced a Capoeira, a dance created by Angolan slaves in Brazil as a way to conceal martial arts training, the choice of which was in line with the performance's theme of racial oppression. Two large puppets represented the novel's protagonists, Stephen Dedalus and Leopold Bloom, while another actor on stilts played Myles Crawford, the fictional editor of *The Evening Telegraph*, the newspaper Bloom works for. Through a choreographed dance that suggested motion on city streets, the performers physically played out various scenes from the Aeolus chapter. The act concluded with Myles Crawford's fart, which does not appear in *Ulysses*, represented on stage by a brief pyrotechnic and puff of green smoke.

As the Edwardian Dubliners exited the stage, Asian dancers entered. The music changed to accommodate a Chinese "Lion Dance" that was performed by approximately fifty dancers with drums, cymbals, flags, and a large paper lion with an actor at its head and another at its hind legs. The Asian dancers were followed by West Africans in bright red costumes, also approximately fifty in number. The Asian and West African dancers provided the most energetic, polished, and colorful dances in the performance, though, not all the dancers were of Asian and West African heritage. In fact, many were native Irish. The dancers were recruited from the Irish Chinese Information Centre and the Arambe Theatre Company, whose members are Asian, West African, and native Irish. At first glance, the fact that Irish performers appeared in dances billed as distinctly Asian and West African might have seemed disingenuous, but this choice ultimately served to convey the performance's theme of cultural diversity and racial amalgamation.

Following the West African dancers, the fourth and final group took the stage. Recruited from Dublin's inner-city neighborhoods through the Fire Station Artists' Studios and the Ballybough Youth Project, this group was composed of adults dressed in Edwardian costumes, who performed a tradi-



Puppet of Leopold Bloom in *Parable of the Plums*, Bloomsday 2004, Dublin. Photo: Phillip Massey.

tional Irish waltz, and children, who performed a contemporary hip-hop dance. The Edwardian Dubliners, Asians, and West Africans came back on the stage and all 170 performers danced their respective pieces weaving between one another. An actor dressed as James Joyce, in a suit, dark glasses, and white Daedalus-like wings, was elevated by crane high above the stage, as confetti, meant to represent the plum stones that the women spit down on the street from Nelson's Pillar, was shot into the air and rained down on the dancers and the audience. The presence of Joyce floating high above and seeming to preside over the multitude of racially diverse performers suggested that Joyce himself would have approved of this representation of his text; moreover, it suggested that were Joyce alive today, he might have written *Ulysses* with a West African or Asian protagonist.

The Parable of the Plums was the product of an ambitious and diverse collaboration. It was initially conceived by Philip Mullen and Cormac O'Hanrahan of the Diddlem Club, a group of Joyce enthusiasts, and Helen Monaghan of the James Joyce Centre who produced the show. The overall

performance was directed by Brian Fleming of De Jimbe, an Afro-Celt music band, with individual sections developed by Raymond Keane of Barabbas, a theatre company specializing in physical and visual performance, and Bisi Adigun of Arambe, Ireland's only African theatre company. It was funded by Dublin City Council and the Irish Department of Arts.

The Parable of the Plums did more than simply show Dublin's racial diversity. It invited people of color to participate in a theatrical representation of one of Ireland's national literary treasures, and in so doing, implicitly conferred equal citizenship upon them at a time when many are struggling for equal rights. *Ulysses* is an ideal text for highlighting issues of racial or religious oppression, for it is essentially a novel about being an outsider. Leopold Bloom, who is of Jewish descent, is frequently made to feel as an unwelcome outsider by other Irish characters, and Stephen Dedalus, who rejects Catholicism, is likewise made to feel an outsider by his mostly Catholic countrymen. Given the dramatic increase in the last eight years of refugees, asylum-seekers, and anti-immigrant sentiment, this street performance made a bold and progressive statement very much within the spirit of *Ulysses* itself. It also demonstrated the relevance of Joyce's novel to the inhabitants of a vibrant, diverse, and contemporary Dublin.

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BABEL. By Mohamed Kacimi. Directed by Alain Timar. Clarence Brown Theatre Company and Théâtre des Halles (Avignon). Clarence Brown Theatre, Knoxville, Tennessee. 12 June 2004.

The Tower of Babel receives remarkably brief mention in the Old Testament given its subsequent power as myth and symbol. As recorded in Genesis, the mighty Nimrod built the tower in Babylon on a plain in Shinar, its top extending to the heavens. When God saw this tower and realized that the people who built it were capable of achieving anything, he confused their language so that they would not understand each other and scattered them over the face of the earth. The tower was henceforth named Babel, which derives from the Hebrew *Bab-ilu*, "Gate of God," and *Bal-al*, "confusion."

As a parable of humankind's desire for unity and its exile into linguistic diversity, the story of Babel offers a powerful emblem of the challenges and opportunities facing intercultural theatre practitioners, particularly those seeking to work with language difference and linguistically conditioned cultural identities. An ambitious project bringing together the Clarence Brown Theatre Company of Knoxville, Tennessee, and the Théâtre des Halles of Avignon, France, has transformed the Babel story into a daring project in international collaboration. In conjunction with Blake Robison and Bonnie K. A. Gould of the University of Tennessee Theatre Department (home of the Clarence Brown Theatre), Alain Timar, director and founder of the Théâtre des Halles, assembled twelve actors based in France and the United States with different language backgrounds: Arabic, Chinese, English, Ethiopian, French, Greek, Hebrew, Hindi, Italian, Russian, Spanish, and Yoruba. The group came together for workshops in December 2002 and May 2003, then for more extensive workshop rehearsals during April and May 2004. Using material generated during the initial workshops, Algerian-born playwright Mohamed Kacimi wrote the script for *Babel*, which played (in English) at the Clarence Brown Theatre and subsequently (in French, under the title *Babel-Taxi*) at the Festival d'Avignon.

Kacimi's story takes full advantage of the production's international cast. A tour bus carrying passengers from around the world breaks down near the Euphrates River. These passengers, who have come to Mesopotamia with different histories and needs, are invited to continue their journey to Babel on a felucca, or taxi-boat, run by a young Italian, Amor, and his Russian girlfriend, Aza. After an unexpected storm leaves them shipwrecked in a swamp, the characters continue on foot to the site of Babel, only to discover that the mythic tower no longer exists. As they try to come to terms with this absence, they confront the histories of violence, loss, and exile that mark their lives and the fractured world of the twenty-first century. Voices rise from the adjoining river, and in the midst of this acoustic stream the site where Babel once stood reveals itself to be a cemetery of ancestors, memories, and dead languages. As they are joined by a young man and his mother, who claims to have lived through Nebuchadnezzar's conquest of Jerusalem, the group debates whether to rebuild the tower and rekindle the aspirations it embodied or to accept the failure of the dreams the passengers had projected onto it.

In designing the set for *Babel*, Timar strove for simplicity and fluidity. The floor was covered with a large muslin cloth, the sides of which could be