

# A Fresh Portrait



Of the many great events on offer at Fermanagh's Flive festival, one spectacle in particular stood alone in the limelight. *Young Stephen*— an energetic, one-man dramatisation of James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Adapted for stage by Prin Ó Duigneáin, Paddy McEaney stars as Stephen Dedalus, Joyce's own semi-fictional avatar.

The performance provides a fresh interpretation of Joyce's work, focusing on the childhood of Stephen Dedalus. Set mostly during Stephen's first term at boarding school, the play examines the influence of two major factors in Joyce's early development; religion and politics.

Keeping to one setting and limiting the themes helps reel in Joyce's chaotic style. True to the spirit of portrait, McEaney's performance gives a strong sense of perspective through his narrative voice. A simplistic and immature vocal tone opens the play, showing us a world through the eyes of an infant, then a sharp change to clear and serious dialogue shows us the trials of adolescence. His mastery of voice eases the understanding of this fast paced play, with frequent time skips and multiple characters. These subtle changes in accent and tone aid suspension of disbelief in a way that makes it easy to forget this is a one man show.

It isn't just the acting talent that holds the staggered story together, but a minimal yet effective attitude towards stage props. A simple dressing panel serves to hide a small number of clothing items, the various hats and jackets which help discern between Stephen and the other characters, while a wooden box serves as table, school desk, bed and pulpit. A certain amount of imagination is still required to picture the changing locations, or believe that our bearded protagonist is a teenage boy, but the small touches can make all the difference, especially the iconic glasses that serve an important role in the plot and help us see Joyce brought to life on stage.

There is no better time to revisit Joyce's formative work, with the centenary of the 1916 Easter Rising earlier this year, exploring the art of that era gives us an important first-hand account of the period. The political and theological upheaval of the time had a huge impact on Joyce, as evidenced by his bringing up these themes repeatedly in his semi-autobiographical work.

One of the vital parts of transitioning to adulthood is the epiphany that adults have differing beliefs, and are not always right. We see Joyce beginning to form his own beliefs and opinions, as he challenges the

authority of the priests in his Catholic boarding school and sees the disruption caused by secular politics discussed at a family dinner.

Snippets of these themes are present from the opening lines of the play, with dialogue cleverly chosen from the source material to strengthen them. The climactic final scene, so expertly weaved by McEaney, takes on a life of its own as Stephen's family clash on the stage. Where the protagonist himself disappears behind other characters, in a sense he is embodied by the audience, who get to experience his anxiety instead.

This surreal feeling really adds to its magic of the play, but sadly it is over too soon. Despite McEaney's talent, no one could be expected to give such an energetic and heartfelt performance for a longer running time.

*Young Stephen* is an easy performance to view, but slightly less so to digest. Fans of Joyce's work will relish it, but may be left disappointed they can't witness *more* of the powerful rendition. As McEaney says of performing Joyce's work, 'great writing will always speak for itself,' but in this case great acting has helped it speak volumes.

### ***Caimin O'Shea***

*Young Stephen* was performed at Blakes of the Hollow on October 2<sup>nd</sup>, and again late October in the Columbian Hall Theatre, Galway, with further dates to be confirmed.