

'Himself and Nora' musical brings life and loves of a literary giant to life

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Jessica Burrows plays Nora Barnacle in "Himself and Nora." / Photos: Randex Communications

Written by
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Press

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Entertainment

While there's already been a Broadway musical called "James Joyce's The Dead," here's a show that could be called "James Joyce Is Alive and Sexy."

Jonathan Brielle's musical "Himself and Nora," now making a strong debut in Hamilton Stage in Rahway, centers far more on Joyce's private life than on his struggles to write "Ulysses." Considering how hot he was for Nora Barnacle when they met in 1904 – and how equally passionate she was for him – it's a wonder that he ever started the book, let alone finished it.

Excellent director Michael Bush has taken his two splendid leads, Matt Bogart and Jessica Burrows, and immediately has them fondling and groping each other. Only minutes after they've met, Bogart leads Burrows' hand between his legs. Soon they're the beast with two backs and fronts. By show's end, there may not be a patch of skin on either that has gone untouched.

When Bogart and Burrows kiss, their mouths are open so wide that each could accommodate a can of Red Bull. It's all in keeping with Nora's allowing James to bring her to bed on their first date – or did she bring him?



Matt Bogart as James Joyce in 'Himself and Nora.'

HIMSELF AND NORA

WHERE: American Theater Group, 360 Hamilton St.,

Rahway

WHEN: Wednesdays through Saturdays at 8 p.m.,
Sundays at 3 p.m. through May 12

HOW MUCH: \$30 Wednesdays and Thursdays; \$35
Fridays and Saturdays; \$20 students and seniors

CALL: 732-499-8226 or visit
americantheatergroup.org

Men love women who make it easy, and James is no exception. But he has, to use an expression that cropped up much later in the century, "commitment issues." Actually, religion is what gets in the way of their marriage – but not for the usual reason. While both were born Roman Catholics, James is staunchly against the church and its sacraments – one of which is marriage.

A priest, dutifully played by Cole Burden, tsk-tsks at a great many of Joyce's paganisms. Truly devout Catholics may squirm during these scenes and may judge them as replete with blasphemy.

Others may become a big bored in the second act when the story turns familiar: James is suddenly a success and his achievements eclipse his need for Nora. Most everyone, however, will be impressed at how skillfully both Bogart and Burrows age. They look and move with the leisurely gait of middle-agers, and throughout display magnificent voices. They certainly don't need their anachronistic cheek mikes, especially in such an intimate house.

Brielle has given them a peck of Irish-tinted melodies with genuine theatrical flair. First-nighters greeted each one with increasing applause and cheers that said "I can't believe that we just heard another good song! How many can this guy write?"

Quite a few. Brielle's most clever one occurs after the unmarried couple feels it had best leave Ireland and head for a new country. Once in Trieste, Joyce teaches English for a living. But isn't it interesting that the sentences he gives his students are replete with memories of Ireland?

Bogart is taking a leave from his stint in "Jersey Boys" at New York's August Wilson Theatre. He must be much missed there. The clarion voice he gives Joyce is substantially clearer than the writer's prose. When Joyce lets his success go to his head (and all the way down to his toes), we could easily hate him. (The other characters do, referring to him as "Himself," which is no compliment.) Bogart, however, has already made us care for the character so much that we instead feel embarrassed for him.

That Burrows isn't on Broadway is a disgrace to every Manhattan casting director. Just the way she spins mid-song tells an audience that she has many musical comedy genes in her trim body. Nora's a strong woman – that's why Joyce is intoxicated with her – and Burrows brings that arms-akimbo, shoulders back posture and a skeptical look in her eye when she meets him. When she says "Treat me as an equal," Bogart returns the right look: can anyone be equal to you?

In addition to Cole Burden, two other actors are on hand to play multiple roles. David Arthur may be too large to be a leprechaun, but he certainly has a sprite's spirit. While Cat Tate Starmer's lighting is on the dark side, theatregoers even in the most distant seats will still see the sparkle in his eye – especially when he plays Ezra Pound in a razz-ma-tazz number. (You read that correctly.) Lianne Marie Dobbs joins him nicely in that song, but makes her greatest impression when portraying the couple's troubled daughter.

In the end, "Himself and Nora" proves that the woman behind the man is often in front of the man. She may get second billing in the title, but Jonathan Brielle, Michael Bush and Jessica Burrows put her front and center.

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