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A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man

Based on James Joyce's 1916 novel, *A Portrait of the Artist...* tells a coming-of-age story about a young artist's growth to maturity – and eventual rejection of the Catholic Church. The cast are energetic and embrace the physically diverse direction with dedication and commitment, but the content is jeopardised by over-used theatrical techniques. Overall, this is an interesting take on a famous novel. At the Pentameters.

[Jo Sutherland](#) 16th July 2012



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Based on James Joyce's 1916 semi-autobiographical novel, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* follows the religio-philosophical awakening of Stephen Dedalus. This coming-of-age story focuses on the young artist's growth to maturity and adult reasoning, whilst highlighting the attitudinal conflicts between the protagonist and the society in which he is raised. Central to the plot is Stephen Dedalus's rebellion and rejection of the Catholic Church.

This is the first time Joyce's text has been translated onto the stage – so one can perhaps excuse the debut's flaws. Listening to the words alone, Tom Neill's adaptation succinctly captures the narrative and successfully condenses the action into a self-contained seventy-five minute play. However, the Pentameters production of James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* relies on various theatrical techniques, such as physical theatre, mime and sound effects, to breathe life into the content. Unfortunately, the strength and beauty of the language is marred by these overused techniques, which cheapen the dialogue and lessen the potential impact of Joyce's classic. It is a real shame that director Tom Neill lacks faith in the content and supplements the otherwise strong adaptation with a directorial approach that clouds the originality of the text.

The energy and rhythm of the piece is brilliantly engaging – but, on the flip side, it is uncomfortable to watch. The actors shout the majority of their lines and the abundance of unnecessary sound effects becomes somewhat irritating. The integrated use of physical theatre is not always necessary. To put this comment into context; the language alone paints the horrific picture of hell and, therefore, the actors need not enact flames. The audience is capable of engaging their imagination; we don't need spoon-feeding.

In a way, the integration of physical and animalistic movement keeps things interesting. But for the most part, I find myself willing the actors to play with the language a bit more: to enjoy and to savour the words. And to keep the volume down, rather than spit out the words in a stereotypical Irish accent derived mainly from high pitched squeaks and low pitched gargles.

Saying that, the play successfully captures the Catholic fear and attitude towards eternal torment. During a lesson where the teacher lectures the class about hell, the friendly and Father-Ted-like tutor becomes a demon, along with the classmates, all launching themselves onto Stephen Dedalus – a split second later and the evil vanishes, leaving a bewildered Dedalus catching his breath as the droll lesson continues. We see what it's like to be in the mind of the young artist. The language is beautiful and this strong adaptation captures the era.

The cast are energetic and embrace the physically diverse direction with dedication and commitment and there are some genuinely funny moments. However, there are a couple of instances where the ensemble performers appear too enthusiastic; emphatically demanding and stealing attention from where it should be. And there are several times where the actors embody identical characteristics and voices for the various roles played, resulting in one-dimensional portrayals. The strongest actor in this piece is the protagonist – Emily Carmichael. Carmichael is one of the few who does not resort to shouting every line for dramatic impact; instead she connects to the text, visualises the subtleties of the language and evokes meaning from the words.

Overall, this is an interesting take on a famous novel. The production demonstrates imagination and the high energy cannot be faulted. For the most part, the play is flawlessly rehearsed, slick and dynamic – but simultaneously, the action is sometimes messy and chaotic. Perhaps this is intentional; a technique to show Stephen Dedalus's meandering journey from unwilling conformation to social rebellion – or maybe this particular version isn't up to the standard it could be.

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