



## Theatre

# Joyce's Women review – Edna O'Brien's powerful play is a fascinating portrait of a fellow writer

★★★★☆

## Abbey theatre, Dublin

O'Brien's empathy for Joyce shines through in this lavish production, as she brings him to life, seen through the eyes of his mother, wife, daughter and lover

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### Helen Meany

Fri 23 Sep 2022 15.45 BST

**M**arking the centenary of the publication of James Joyce's *Ulysses*, Edna O'Brien's stage portrait of the artist is created through the eyes of the women around him. Commissioned by the [Abbey theatre](#) and co-produced with Eilene Davidson Productions, this new ensemble play reflects 91-year-old O'Brien's lifelong admiration for Joyce's work.

Through the characters of his mother, May (Deirdre Donnelly); wife, Nora Barnacle (Bríd Ní Neachtain); daughter Lucia (Genevieve Hulme Beaman); lover Martha Fleischmann (Caitríona Ní Mhurchú); and patron Harriet Shaw Weaver (Ali White), episodes from their life in exile in Trieste, Paris and Zurich are evoked. In flashback and reverie, Joyce's words – drawn from his short stories, novels, poetry and letters – are threaded through every scene; the life and work inextricable.

As Nora waits for news from the Zurich hospital where Joyce is critically ill in 1941, she tells her story to Brigitte (Hilda Fay). Happier days fill her thoughts: her courtship with Joyce (Stephen Hogan) in Dublin. “Your soul seems to me the most beautiful and melancholy soul in the world,” he tells her, persuading her to leave [Ireland](#) with him.

While Nora's endurance through years of penury has been widely documented, the focus here is on her hardening relationship with her daughter, Lucia, and jealousy of Lucia's closeness to Joyce. Through their creativity and imagination, father and daughter have a bond, with Joyce taking the passionate, later mentally ill, Lucia as inspiration for Anna Livia in *Finnegans Wake*. Hulme Beaman portrays Lucia's expressiveness as a dancer, as well as her violent rages, with compelling vulnerability. One of the most moving scenes is when the ever-generous Weaver visits the dying Joyce and he tells her how he longs to see Lucia.

At its best, Conall Morrison's lavish production conveys O'Brien's deeply empathic identification with Joyce – although some less delicate staging devices detract. A chorus of Dublin voices – accompanied by looming projected images – commenting on Joyce's status as a national literary figure seems heavy-handed, while frequent sung interludes of traditional ballads are also overdone. What lingers is a sense of the fascinating dialogue and interplay between one remarkable writer and another.

At [Abbey theatre, Dublin](#), until 15 October as part of [Dublin theatre festival](#).

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