

## PROGRAMME NOTE FOR MOLLY BLOOM

James Joyce commenced writing *Ulysses* in 1914, the year World War 1 began, a brutal senseless war of self-destruction which profited no one but the barons of the steel industry. He completed the novel seven years later. Joyce was living in self-imposed exile from his motherland, Ireland, in Zurich in neutral Switzerland. He had first left Dublin for Paris in 1902 in order to escape the narrow-mindedness of Irish Catholicism, but also because he could not bring himself to support the Irish nationalists who were urging for violence in order to free their country of British Imperialism. He believed that those who were fighting for the “Irish Revival” were fighting for a nationalism that was simply an imitation of the original English model.

One can imagine how Joyce felt as he read and heard about the thousands of young men from all over Europe and beyond who were marching off to a war under the false belief that they were doing what was right and heroic, only to be slaughtered in the trenches. It brought to his mind the ancient Greek story of Helen, the runaway wife of Menelaus, which resulted in ten years of war on Troy by the Greeks. He decided to create a character, half-Irish half-Jewish, Leopold Bloom, who would be a standing reproach to the myth of ancient military heroism as depicted in the character of Ulysses, otherwise known as Odysseus, in Homer’s *The Odyssey*.

Odysseus was first reluctant to leave his wife, Penelope, and go to war over another man’s unfaithful wife, but later he became a hero, especially after coming up with the idea of the wooden horse. Odysseus could have gone straight home to Penelope after Troy had been crushed, but instead he remained in exile, like Joyce, for many years, but for very different reasons. Odysseus had aspirations to become a greater hero and perhaps become like the gods; he even spent seven years on the island of Ogygia making love to the goddess Calypso. And all the while his devoted wife remained chaste and faithful, awaiting his return, despite the numerous suitors trying to win her hand. Penelope managed to hold them off by promising to choose one of them after completing the shroud she was weaving, but little did they know that every night she was unpicking what she had woven in the day. How foolish these men were to fall for this deceit! For their pains they were slaughtered by Odysseus on his return home for daring to try to woo his wife.

While the action of *The Odyssey* played out over many years, Joyce decided that his parody would play out in one day. He chose 16 June 1904, the day he and Nora Barnacle began their love affair. They were to live ‘in sin’ until they finally married in 1931 after years of pressure from his father. Leopold Bloom leaves his home on the morning of 16 June to attend the funeral of an acquaintance, Paddy Dignam, but instead of returning home to his wife Marion (Molly Bloom) straight afterwards, he wanders the streets of Dublin and only returns way after midnight. Poldy knows that Molly has a four o’clock appointment with Hugh Blazes Boylan, her singing promoter and lover, but instead of rushing home to catch his unfaithful wife, he stays away. He is a nonentity who has absolutely no hankering to become a hero. At the time when British Imperialism believed in making absolute divisions, not just between English and Irish or

English and Indian, but also between men and women, James Joyce sets forth Leopold Bloom as the androgynous man of the future, a man who can share uniquely in the wonder and woe of woman's labour, a heterosexual man in touch with his feminine side. When Leopold finally gets into bed beside Molly, it's with the knowledge that he has been cuckolded by Boylan, but instead of being filled with a violent rage, he plants a kiss on Molly's ample bottom and curls up to sleep with his head at the foot of the bed. For Joyce, violence was just another form of odious pretentiousness; as far as he was concerned nothing was worth a bloody fight, neither land nor sea nor woman. Like Ghandi and Tolstoy and, indeed, Christ before all of them, Joyce redefined heroism as the capacity to endure rather than inflict suffering.

Molly Bloom awakes after feeling her husband's slobbering lips on her bottom, and so begins the 18<sup>th</sup> and final chapter of *Ulysses*, which Joyce titled "Penelope". Molly starts her musings as to where her husband may have been all day, and why he's had the audacity to request breakfast in bed, and why for the last few years he's been subtly pushing her towards turning him into a cuckold.

Nicky Rebelo – director of *Molly Bloom*.