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Film



Dubliners: Angelica Huston and Donal McCann return from an Epiphany celebration in John Huston's *The Dead*.

The Dead: Huston's Epitaph

by Richard von Busack

John Huston's career is not easily summed up by the usual concepts of decline and fall applied to those whose careers lasted as long as his. Though he made his share of bad films, he touched all of the different genres in cinema. And if he excelled in action films, he was also able (when allowed) to make smaller and more personal films.

His last work, *The Dead*, is remarkable not only in that it was made by someone in Huston's health (he was dying of emphysema when he made it), but also in that Huston confronted the knowledge of his own death in it. To put it bluntly, the final scenes of snow on graveyards could not have been easy for him to contemplate. Yet he never missed the essential point of the James Joyce short story upon which this is based. The characters in it are ghosts before their time, isolated from the culture of continental Europe. Gabriel, the main character, knows what he has lost by staying in his remote, dreary corner of the world. He lives in a sense of exile, as his wife does in her memories of her youth. Next to this state, death is a reprieve.

Tony Huston's screenplay follows Joyce's story exactly. It is set in Dublin before World War I at an Epiphany celebration held annually by two maiden aunts. Aunt Julia (Cathleen Delany) is a singer whose voice is dimming with age; her sister Kate (Helena Carroll) is a

pianist and a teacher. Their guests include their nephew Gabriel (Donal McCann), a disaffected professor; his wife, Gretta (Anjelica Huston); and Freddy (Donal Donnelly), an alcoholic family friend. During the course of the evening, the guests dine and reminisce about the great voices of their age while subtly revealing the tensions that will eventually lead to the Easter Rebellion in 1916.

The viewer is rewarded with a sense of actually being a guest at such a party; as in the Merchant-Ivory films (*Room With a View* and *Maurice*), one is refreshed by the leisurely, intelligent and sometimes quaint conversation at the table without actually desiring to become a part of the world on screen. Joyce himself was a lifelong exile from Dublin, though he never stopped writing about it, and he considered himself a warrior against the conventions of his home. This sensibility is intact in this film, though the distance in time between the feast itself and our watching it adds a special resonance to both the film and the melancholy that underlies it. This can't be confused with simple nostalgia.

In the cast, Anjelica Huston once again demonstrates her peerless skills as an actress; one would never recognize the Prizzi princess here. She brings home the futility of Gabriel's life in an epilogue of great loveliness and sorrow. As Gabriel, McCann is more impassive; he

doesn't manage to convey completely his desire for her, expressed so well in the book. (Gabriel's passion for his own wife was one of the factors that made Joyce's *Dubliners* controversial when it was first published.) The rest of the cast is top-notch, with Donal Donnelly bringing a needed touch of poignant levity as Freddy, the hopeless drunk.

Alex North's soundtrack is surprisingly gentle and folkish, considering his bombastic past as the composer for *Spartacus* and other epics of the '50s. The photography is directed by Fred Murphy; it's elegant, and yet it avoids the muted aura in which period filmmakers often swaddle their works.

I can't think of another filmmaker who composed his own epitaph. Certainly no one could have done so with such grace, feeling and richness. In his speech during dinner, Gabriel warns of "a less spacious age" to come. This age is manifested in film, which is declining in quality, and Huston's passing speeds it along.

The Dead opens Friday at Camera One in San Jose. There will also be a benefit screening on Thu., Feb. 4 at Camera 3, sponsored by Mayor Tom McEnery. Tickets, \$25 at the door, include a reception at Upstairs at Eulipia at 6:30pm and the film screening at 8pm. Proceeds will go to the San Jose-Dublin Sister City Exchange Program.