

Burgess' Blooms

By [Zack Bowen](#)

Anthony Burgess had a career-long fascination with James Joyce, especially in bringing Joyce's opaque works to a popular audience. He devoted five books to the cause: *Joycesprick*, *Rejoyce*

, *Here Comes Everybody: An Introduction to James Joyce for the Ordinary Reader*

, *A Shorter Finnegans Wake*,

and the lesser known published libretto to his "musical play" based on *Ulysses*

, *Blooms of Dublin*

Burgess mentions working on "a musical of Ulysses" as early as 1973, but a full scale radio production was first put on for the Dublin Joyce Centenary in 1982.

[Note 1](#)

Liana Burgess has asked me if I would say a few words about this play, one I would call a musical

comedy

instead of its more generalized "play," in the subtitle.

Intrigued by Joyce from the beginning of his career, Burgess was also indebted to other serio-comic writers from Sterne, through Swift and Nabokov, to Waugh and Fleming in his stylistic variations, his experimentation, and his satiric approach. But he seldom paid any of his other models the homage he did to James Joyce. He shared a lot of things with Joyce, including primarily an ingenious sense of comedy as well as a penchant for popular culture, and a certain indignation at hypocrisy. But there was also another similarity: they both were semi-professional musicians, and included their love for and familiarity with music in their works. Burgess had perhaps more formal training in composition and instrumental performance, and his *Napoleon Symphony*

, especially, indicated his virtuosity in integrating musical orchestration and structure into a fictional text.

[Note 2](#)

Burgess has admitted publicly that he thought of himself as a comic writer, and he had a comic sensibility that was congenial with Joyce's. [Note 3](#) But Burgess was more of a professional teacher than Joyce, and I think Burgess could not let obtuse material remain unexplicated to the

extent that Joyce did, despite Burgess' own protests to the contrary; hence, for instance, Burgess' Russian/English glossary appended to

A Clockwork Orange

. He never especially wanted to write esoteric puns/jokes for people who wouldn't be able to understand them.

Burgess believed that music could both augment the tragic and turn the ordinary as well as the sensational into comedy, depending on its mode, tempo, and lyrics, and the way in which it is interpreted by its composer, performer and audience. Joyce included in *Ulysses* only two fragments of his own musical notation: one a line of Gregorian chant, and the other a hand-written melody for the "Ballad of 'Little Sir Harry Hughes'" that Stephen sings to Bloom in Ithaca. But all the rest of the more than 850 song references in

Ulysses

were attached to existing melodies, most of which were eminently familiar to 1904 Dublin audiences. Many were performed during the course of Bloom's day by the characters in the Sirens episode, and a few elsewhere. However, the song references often appear in the thoughts of characters, and just as often as not in terms of their tunes as well as lyrics. Let me offer an example: Bloom remembers not only the words but the music of Molly's rendition of a line from "The Young May Moon." The secret is in the spelling: "She was humming. The young May moon she's beaming, love... Glowworm's la-amp is gleaming love." (8:588-89) The hyphen in "la-amp" indicates that the one syllable word is split between two musical notes. There are dozens of other mental musical performances of the same sort, such as Bloom's rendition of the last line of "Love's Old Sweet Song" : "Comes lo-ove's old..."

Burgess has his own musical fish to fry. As I listened to *Blooms of Dublin* I waited in vain for a full rendering of "Love's Old Sweet Song," and for "The Seaside Girls." The former was missing altogether, and the latter, which had been popular on both the British and Irish stages, was represented by an entirely new Burgess composition in both lyrics and melody. The reason for interspersing Joyce's musical verbiage with new tunes and lyrics composed by Burgess himself was, I think, two-fold: first, to offer a new essentially comic twist to the text to call attention to its already comic and musical tone (a little like

Oliver

, the musical version of

Oliver Twist

); and secondly to afford Burgess the pleasure of participating in an artistic collaboration with Joyce himself in creating a new

Ulysses

somewhat different from the original, but intended more for a popular audience.

Blooms of Dublin

is really an ingeniously creative textual explication which conveys a strong sense of the presence of the explicator (Burgess) as well as the author. A prime example of this in

Blooms of Dublin

is Stephen's final scene in the production; his last lines are taken up with his speculation regarding a proposed sea story he has twice previously mentioned that he might write. As he leaves Bloom--without entering 7 Eccles Street--he begins composing the lines which actually introduces Bloom in Calypso: "Mr Bloom ate with relish the inner organs of beasts and fowls. He liked thick giblet soup... etc." Burgess thus makes Stephen the putative author of the Homeric parody. Although a lot of Joyce critics might agree, it is not something most would care to assert unequivocally.

A second example of Burgess bringing a substantive psychological interpretation to the original occurs in the brothel scene of the musical, in which Bella assumes the dominant role over Bloom because, as she intuits, "the missus is master. Petticoat government." I am not so sure that masochism is necessarily identical with hen-pecked husbandry. Throughout *Blooms of Dublin*

Burgess explicates/answers Joyce's ambiguities with his own interpretations of actions and speeches, and the answers Burgess provides are plausible but a little too simplistic for the far more complex/opaque Joyce I read in the novel.

Burgess's earlier attempt at this sort of joint authorship collaboration in his shorter version of the *Wake* met with some harsh criticism, and he was wounded by fundamentalist Joyce scholars who saw every profanation of the divine text as a sacrilege. Joyceanism, which is a literary religion to its believers, can demand a textual purity in which, Burgess believed, even Joyce probably would not insist. Purist Joyceans are given to epic battles over commas in different editions and tend to greet anything like radically new versions of the original with the same apoplexy as fundamentalist-creationists encountering Darwinism.

Thus, professional Joyce scholars are prone to offer a standard textual orthodoxy as justification for condemning what is changed, excluded, or modified in *Blooms of Dublin*. I admit to being shaken by the blasphemy of Deasy's appearing in the tower, and the near absence of Stephen's Proteus/beach metaphysics (only briefly alluded to in another section of the musical). Lotus Eaters and Scylla may be gone, but they would not be forgotten by the Joyce critics; and there are other Burgess changes to no seeming aesthetic end, like Lenehan's story of Bloom collecting on the horse, Throwaway, being put in Hyne's mouth.

The play is a Joyce/Burgess production and should be experienced as a new separate identity, certainly, but it is hardly one that can be dissociated from the original novel. While Burgess' scenes are largely Joycean prose, variations sometimes jar the ear, and it is impossible not to make comparison. If the play were the first thing one experienced, it certainly might be thought of as some sort of an introduction to *Ulysses*, rather than an independent statement of itself.

But to understand every word of the lyrics and dialogue, an uninitiated audience would still need a lengthy series of annotation.

Burgess's big contributions are the thirty-seven songs, musicalizations, overtures, recitatives, etc.--all the operatic paraphernalia of musical comedy. The music is Burgess' own as well as the orchestration. While all but a few of the ideas come from the novel, Burgess has contributed their transition into poetry and song with hybrid adaptations of Joyce's language intermixed with Burgess's own prose and interpretations.

The songs, for the most part, are lively, quick and funny, replete with multisyllabic and internal rhymes in the style of Gilbert and Sullivan. There are duets, contrapuntal motifs, trios, quartets, and expansive choruses which lend a comic majesty to the proceedings. The kinds of comic songs sung by Mulligan, the citizen, or Boylan and Molly are as rollicking as might be expected, and there are moments of pathos from Bloom and Stephen, and great comic choral commentaries during the Cyclops and Circe proceedings. The scenes are mostly bundled in expanded staged public gatherings, such as adding Deasy to the tower crowd in the opening, and featuring such sites as the newspaper office, the pubs, the brothel--in short wherever a chorus gathers.

It is impossible to do justice to merits of *Blooms of Dublin*, without hearing it. I had never seen or heard the work performed, and so naturally interpreted the printed libretto differences with its *Ulysses* model perhaps too literally, failing to appreciate them aesthetically in terms of the production. Now that I have heard the recorded version I have a far higher appreciation of what Burgess was trying to do and how well he managed to pull it off. The play is not Shakespeare, God/Bloom knows, but it was an act of extraordinary and painstaking homage by Burgess to write the music and orchestration for the production, and by and large I think it was a daring and rewarding experience both for Burgess and his audience. The music is something of a cross between Broadway musical comedy and Dublin bawdy. The chorus numbers in Cyclops and Circes are splendid, and Circe, with its theatrical staging already provided, is as good as musical comedy gets. The comedy basis of life which I think Joyce tried to convey is more fully and blatantly represented by Burgess's music, and I, for one, am grateful to him for writing it.

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