



REVIEW: *Letters to Lucia*

BLOOMSDAY is celebrated each June 16 in cities across the world. But the setting of the Northampton event in Kingsthorpe Cemetery beside the grave of Lucia is unique.

The location grants a special atmosphere to the performance – with the mournful sound of the uilleann pipes carrying on the breeze, the actors in period costume, and the graveside almost appearing ethereal, the stage is set for a memorable and moving production.

Letters to Lucia includes the characters: James Joyce, Samuel Beckett – who in real life acted as Joyce's amanuensis as well as, allegedly, Lucia's lover, Mrs Nora Joyce (Nora Barnacle), Miss Kathleen Neel – an American-born dancer who was Lucia's friend in Paris, and Mr Frank Budgen – a self-taught artist and friend of Joyce.

Acting as narrator in the play, Budgen teases out facts we already know, but with a wry, entertaining spirit – and in an echo of Joyce's work, with a background of surreal circumstance. His exchange with Joyce, early in the play, is typical:

BUDGEN [to the audience]: 'He was at the time working on a long, complex, stylistically innovative novel which, in the unlikely event of it ever being published, was to be entitled *Ulysses*. The action apparently took place over one day in Dublin in 1904. June 16th. Today. Joyce looked pleased with himself.'

'You've had a good day's writing?', I enquired. 'Excellent,' he said. 'Two sentences.'

I made every effort to share his enthusiasm. 'Two sentences. Grand! You were obviously having some trouble finding the right words.'

'Oh no,' said Joyce. 'I always had the right words. It was putting them in the right order that was the problem.'

(Pause)

'Now, this is neither the time nor place to speculate as to whether Joyce actually wrote that famous sketch in the *Morecambe and Wise Christmas Show* of 1971 in which Eric Morecambe made the same observation to André Previn about his piano playing. As far as I know that was the work of Eddie Braben, but I died earlier in 1971, so I missed it anyway.'

Humour is evident throughout. Budgen at one point announces: 'I can't believe we're still waiting for Beckett.' An exchange between the pair then takes place:

BUDGEN: 'Ah! Beckett we've been waiting for you. We've gone home. That's why we're still here.'

BECKETT: 'Very funny.'

BUDGEN: 'If you need somewhere to stay tonight there's a nice dustbin over there for you.'

BECKETT: 'The humour just keeps on coming.'

BUDGEN: 'Did you call in at the County Cricket Ground on your way up here?'

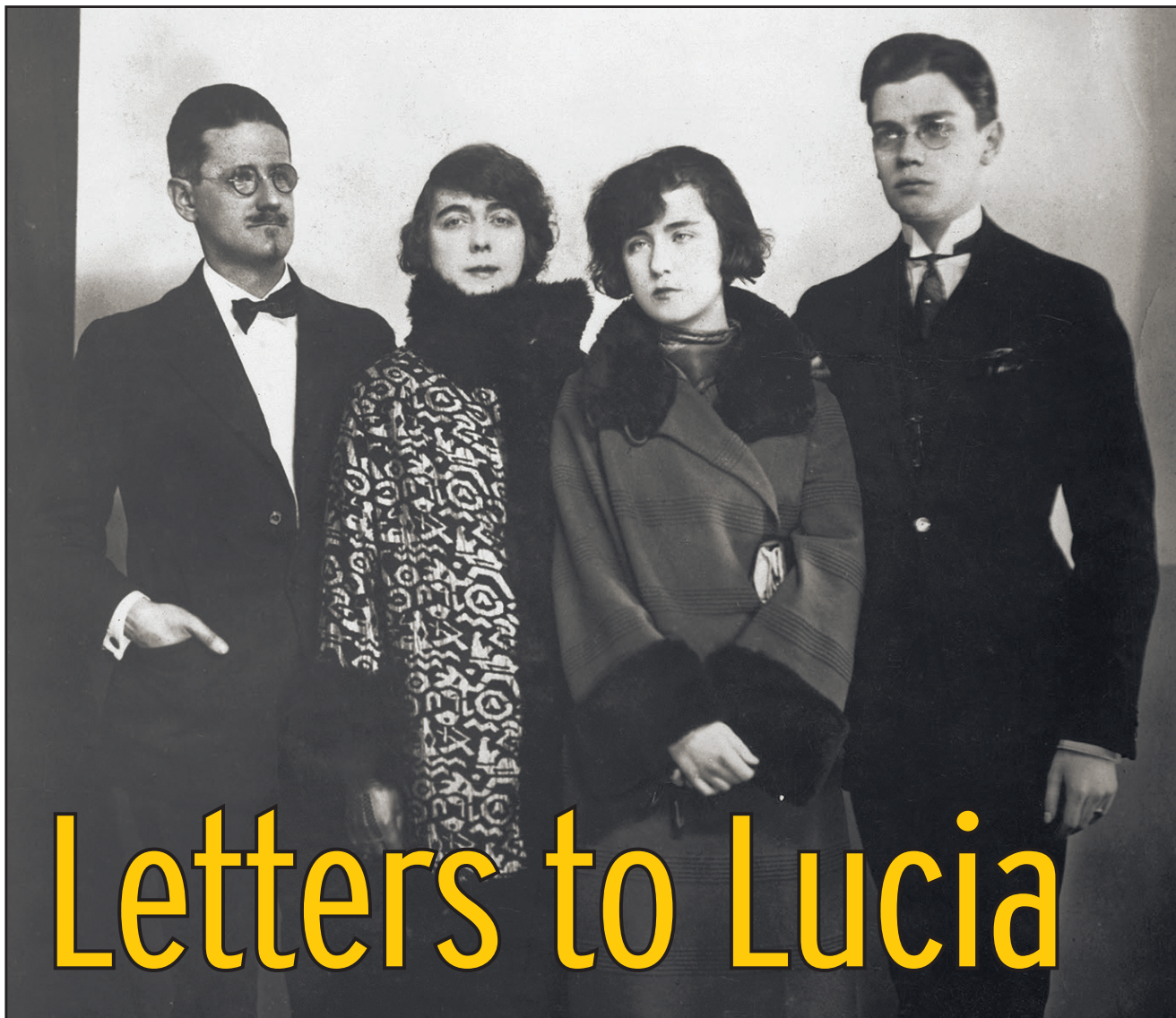
There is little new information in the play, such as the above allusion to Beckett being a cricket player of international stature, but characters are brought back to life in a new alignment. It's funny, thought provoking, erudite and entertaining, in equal measure.

But above all it is poignant – the outline of Lucia's tragic life is laid bare, alongside her illustrious father's attempts to cope with it.



BLOOMSDAY:
Gerry Molumby
as James Joyce

Picture: Deirdre O'Byrne



FAMILY PHOTO: The Joyce family in 1924 – James Joyce, Nora Barnacle, Lucia, and son Giorgio Picture: Getty Images

LUCIA Anna Joyce, only daughter of James Joyce and Nora Barnacle, died in 1982 after a life that can only be described as tragic.

Born in Trieste, she was a professional dancer before illness overtook her, and apparently had a short affair with Samuel Beckett.

But Lucia was diagnosed as a schizophrenic in her late twenties, and despite treatment – even the Swiss psychoanalyst Carl Jung examined her – she never led an independent life thereafter.

Lucia was institutionalised at the Burghölzli psychiatric clinic in Zurich, where James Joyce was living at the time, and where he is now buried.

She was subsequently transferred to St Andrew's Hospital in Northampton, where she remained until her death.

Every year on Bloomsday, June 16, Lucia's grave in Kingsthorpe Cemetery is the focus for Joyce enthusiasts from Northampton and further afield to gather and pay tribute to her life, as well as to share readings from her father's work. Celebrants and attendees over the years have included hospital staff who knew Lucia, Joyce's biographer Gordon Bowker, Sean Cannon from the Dubliners, representatives of the Irish Embassy in London and members of the Triskellion Irish Theatre Company, based in Nottingham.

Triskellion's indomitable Gerry Molumby

is one of the main instigators and organisers of the event.

In 2018 local writers Richard Rose and James Vollmar decided to enhance the usual readings with a short play entitled *Letters to Lucia*.

The drama is focused on fictional correspondence to Lucia from key personalities who knew her, including her father and mother, Samuel Beckett, and Kathleen Neel who had performed with Lucia in a Paris dance troupe. Frank Budgen, artist and writer and close confidante of the Joyce family, was portrayed as narrator in the drama.

Members of Triskellion Irish Theatre Company performed the play in costume. Incidental music was provided by Irish champion uilleann piper Colin O'Loughlin.

The Triskellion Publications company has now made available the script of this unique play, with additional material by the writers detailing the origins of the project. The publication also includes a rare and fascinating interview with Sheila George, an occupational therapist who worked with Lucia at St Andrew's.

The book has a foreword by noted Joyce scholar and Senator in the Irish Parliament David Norris.

According to Senator Norris, the relationship between Joyce and his daughter was every bit as complex as one might imagine. From biographies it seems that Joyce was in great despair about his daughter's mental health. Senator Norris

writes in the foreword: 'Jung maintained that Joyce and Lucia were like two people, both going to the bottom of a river, but while Joyce was diving, Lucia was drowning.'

David Norris also reveals that in letters he exchanged with Lucia when she was confined in Northampton ('a desultory correspondence', as he put it) she regularly referred to her father as 'the James Joyce'. It was almost, Senator Norris writes, as if her father existed in some institutional form.

In a poignant note, the senator recounts how, in 1982 when he heard about her death, he sent a single white rose stem to Northampton. He was later informed that his single rose was the only flower on Lucia's coffin.

Senator Norris concludes by writing: 'For Joyce enthusiasts and those who would like to know more about this extraordinary family and its links to Dublin, Paris, Zurich, Trieste and Northampton, *Letters to Lucia* represents a valuable addition to existing Joycean commentary from a unique angle.'

For theatre companies it provides a text for performance and an opportunity to share this work with their audiences far and wide.

■ *Letters to Lucia* is available from Gerry Molumby for £8 including packaging and postage worldwide: fmolumby@aol.com www.irelandanditsdiaspora.com