

Titolo || Joyce Story Interpreted in Dance and Photography

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Pubblicato || «Seen And Heard International», 29 gennaio 2014 [<http://seenandheard-international.com/2014/01/joyce-story-interpreted-dance-photography/>]

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Numero pagine || pag 1 di 1

Lingua || ENG

DOI ||

Joyce Story Interpreted in Dance and Photography

di *John O'Dwyer*

For the first twenty or so of its fifty-five minutes, Città de Ebla's *The Dead* (a 'free adaptation' of the story by James Joyce) is a riveting presentation of a woman remembering a room she stayed in with her now dead lover. Through the use of a scrim, set at the very front of the stage, the Barbican's small, underground auditorium becomes a two-dimensional screen. The photographic images that first appear on its grey surface slowly come to form a ghostly, female figure. When this never fully represented figure has grown, and moved so close, that its legs are the size of tree trunks, a curved line that has been taking shape to the right reveals itself to be the handle of a giant suitcase. Any relief at this sight of a recognizable (though hyper-real) object is short-lived. The lighting immediately switches to show the other side of the screen, where a living woman, with the same suitcase, is seen moving about in darkness. The two-dimensional and three-dimensional now juxtapose as pieces of furniture (full-length mirror, chair, lamp) are seen first of all as bright, larger-than-life photographs on the screen before appearing, one by one, in the space behind. The woman creates the room as she remembers it. The sounds that accompany her as she does so are disconcerting. First of all there is a crackle that grows more audible until it resembles heavy rain. When the remembered room is fully furnished, and lit by faint yellow light, voices are heard as if from the street outside. These become louder, but remain indistinct, as the yellow light grows stronger.

The purely photographic sequence that follows is of less interest. Seen always from the point of view of the dead lover she is supposed to be remembering, the woman smiles at the camera, drinks coffee, poses for a sketch (a man's fingers are just visible, holding the sketchpad), has soft-core sex in grainy black-and-white. There *is* an interlude in which the screen is suffused with red (as in Hitchcock's 'Marnie'), and the living woman revealed behind it, her body contorted in grief. Apart from that, and to the detriment of the piece as a whole, this sequence does not show anything new. When the woman wakes, interest is restored. She feels the empty space in the double bed beside her, then gets up and moves around the room. The objects around her now are signifiers of loss. She lights a cigarette and looks in the mirror; actions that are repeated, and held, in images of black-and-white. If the ending is unsuccessful, it is because there is too much happening: too much technology, too much stage machinery, too much for the performer to do and to think about doing. Nobody in the audience seemed certain that it *was* the end, so the applause was slow in coming. As Valentina Bravetti came out to take her bow, you could see for the first time something that, behind the scrim and in the photographs, had never been visible: the light in her eyes.