

# James Joyce's Dubliners comes alive in Delhi through immersive theatre

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Adithi Reena Ajith

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More than a century after Irish writer James Joyce published *Dubliners*, the lives of his characters continue to feel familiar. Young people dreaming of leaving home, the frustrations of everyday life, and people caught between duty and desire—these are some of the themes of the year-long cultural programme by Delhi's Kaivalya Plays Foundation in partnership with the Embassy of Ireland.

Ireland celebrates the Bloomsday festival—named after Leopold Bloom, the protagonist of Joyce's famously dense novel, *Ulysses*—on June 16. The Delhi programme uses it as a starting point to explore Joyce's work through theatre, sound and visual storytelling.

"The Year of Joyce Project, in partnership with Kaivalya Plays, was designed to bring the writing of James Joyce to a wider audience across India," says Ambassador of Ireland to India Kevin Kelly. Launched last year, the initiative has travelled to Delhi's Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, OddBird Theatre and the Hornbill Festival in Nagaland before returning to Delhi this month.



Varoon P Anand, artistic director of Kaivalya Plays, during the dramatised reading of 'Counterparts'

### **Why Joyce still matters**

For Varoon P. Anand, artistic director of Kaivalya Plays, Joyce's enduring appeal lies in his understanding of ordinary lives. "These stories all focus on one character, but they also share a common thread of paralysis," says Anand. "People are unable to make decisions or move forward. It's a common feeling today."

The 20th century Dublin Joyce wrote about grappling with housing crisis, overcrowding and other existential issues. "Whether it's someone hoping to move overseas, someone caught in the pressures of work, or someone trying to understand disappointment, these stories still speak to contemporary audiences," adds Gaurav Singh Nijjer, technical director of James Joyce Immersive. "Much of modern society remains caught in a rat race, having to work harder to make ends meet and finding escapes outside."

For Raymond Mullen, Deputy Chief of Mission at the Embassy of Ireland and a Joycean scholar who previously taught *Ulysses* at Queen's University Belfast, Joyce's appeal lies in his ability to transcend geography and history. "Joyce's work uses the familiarity of the local to negotiate the universal," he says. Mullen believes Joyce resonates in India because both countries inherited English as a colonial language before reshaping it to express their own identities. "In Dublin as in Delhi, language becomes a site of resistance, reinvention and ultimate liberation. Joyce remains vital because he showed the world how to take an inherited speech and make it sing in a completely new key."

### **Choosing *Dubliners***

Kaivalya Plays went with *Dubliners*, the 1914 collection of short stories that introduced many of the ideas Joyce would later develop in his novels, as their starting point. "The stories let us enter the minds of ordinary people," says Anand. The three selected stories each explore a distinct emotional conflict. 'Eveline' examines family responsibility and the possibility of a new life abroad, 'Counterparts' explores authority and wounded pride, while 'Araby' captures youthful longing, first love and its inevitable disappointment.

The team briefly experimented with relocating 'Counterparts' to present-day Gurugram—replacing Dublin pubs with corporate offices and the city's nightlife—but eventually abandoned the idea. "It was becoming more about the location instead of the character," Anand explains. "Joyce's stories are ultimately about people."

### **Beyond traditional theatre**

Unlike conventional theatre, the performances combine dramatised readings with projection mapping, spatial sound and live visuals that surround audiences. Four speakers

create an enveloping soundscape, while projections transform the gallery walls into the characters' inner worlds.

"We haven't changed Joyce's text," Anand says. "The challenge wasn't rewriting the stories. It was asking what the visuals and sound could express that isn't already on the page." In 'Araby', for instance, the narrator's descriptions of everyday life are accompanied by projections and soundscapes that reveal the emotional intensity beneath his words rather than simply illustrating them. "Our visuals aren't there to repeat the text," Nijjer notes. "They're there to express what's happening inside the character."

Anand says the immersive format responds to post-pandemic audience habits, as people have grown accustomed to experiencing art individually through screens. "We wanted to bring people back into a shared experience," he says. "To sit together and listen together and afterwards look at each other and ask, 'What did we just experience?'"

### **Democratising the arts**

Beyond the performances, the programme includes workshops on stream-of-consciousness writing and improvisation, which Anand says are as important as the productions themselves.

"As a community arts organisation, accessibility is one of our core commitments," Anand says, particularly for young artists who may not know how to enter the field. "Arts education isn't just about learning performance. It's about learning to collaborate, think critically and express yourself."

Reflecting on staging Joyce, he says: "Rather than trying to change Joyce, we wanted to show that these themes already resonate today. People may be separated by more than a hundred years, but the emotions remain remarkably similar."

*The James Joyce Immersive opens with 'Counterparts' at the KNMA, Saket (June 14). At Triveni Kala Sangam, 'Counterparts' and 'Eveline' (June 20) and 'Araby' (June 16 and 21).*