

Celtic Comforts for Boston Yuletide By Paul Keating

It is sometimes too easy to forget what a personal medium radio remains, but when it is done right it allows for a one to one connection between the presenter and the audience. And, perhaps, more importantly it allows the imagination of the listener to wander off and evoke experiences from their past inspired by a spoken or musical reference in a broadcast.

Such a program is the weekly Celtic Sojourn on Boston's WGBH-FM (89.7) hosted by Brian O'Donovan from Clonakilty in West Cork. His thoughtful thematic musical forays on Saturday afternoons (www.wgbh.org) seize the audience and spur Celtic cultural curiosity and variety, and he has developed a loyal if ethnically diverse following.

Since 2003, O'Donovan has broken out of the confines of the radio station to share his Christmas Celtic Sojourn in a live performance, and the 2005 show captured the essence of the season in a dazzling show that may yet prove an enduring downtown Boston tradition at Yuletide.

Last weekend four performances (one matinee was added to meet the demand for tickets) were presented in the gorgeous Beaux Arts Cutler Majestic Theater on Tremont Street in Boston's theater district. This landmark ornate hall that originally opened at the dawn of the 20th century was marvelously restored to its original splendor by Emerson College and reopened in 2003. It continues a rich legacy of historic performances.

The Christmas Celtic Sojourn playing to capacity crowds all weekend didn't disappoint at the Saturday evening show that I attended, and provided entertainment that was as old-fashioned as it was innovative fitting a recurring theme of Sean Nos/Nua Nos (Old Style/New Style).

O'Donovan presided over the stage production in animated fashion like Father Christmas sharing his many gifts. At times he was like the Fear a Ti (Man of the House) at an Irish Christmas party where he called on his many talented guests to offer their party pieces.

A comfortable wing-back chair (something old) on the left of the stage allowed him to read poetry by Patrick Kavanagh and his own moving and comical West Cork Christmas remembrances, replacing Dylan Thomas's A Child's Christmas in Wales from earlier years.

A remote mike (something new) allowed him to move about the stage freely to engage with individual performers as he might in radio studio interview on his show revealing information that gave context to the material.

The stagecraft worked out in advance by Brian, his wife Lindsay and the artistic director Paula Plum was superb as it gave a sophisticated setting to what was essentially a very simple show that allowed the artists to blend together as if at a house party, and not in a three-tiered hall of 1,200 seats.

The exceptional band Danu formed the musical base, and their spirited rendering of the jigs, reels, slip jigs and polkas flew the traditional banner in their very contemporary manner.

Their singer Muireann Nic Amhlaoibh was prominently featured throughout, whether it was the humorous “Only Nineteen Years Old” or the poignant Tommy Sands’ song “County Down” about immigration, which is always a Christmas tide topic for the Irish.

She also led the audience in singing the carols “Angels We Have Heard on High,” the “First Noel” and also an Irish song where the phrase “The Son of God will sleep in this house tonight” gave meaning to the custom of a lit candle in an Irish window.

The Wisconsin-based a capella group called Navan (Sheila Shigley, Elizabeth Fine and Paul Gorman) harmonizes in six Celtic languages (www.navan.org) and O’Donovan has featured them in past efforts as well displaying his knack for finding good talent who enhanced this show.

In that vein, Scotsman Tony McManus — now living in Toronto — gave ample display of his guitar artistry on several solos in each half while sharing his familiarity and necessity for seeking out Asian nail joints who service his right hand with acrylic nails, but only his right hand now.

Rounding out the instrumental talent were Natalie and Brittany Haas, who played cello and fiddle respectively, proving that Celtic music truly knows no bounds. They played together and with McManus and the ensemble.

What made this show extra special were the inclusion of Nua-Nos, four dancers who met at the University of Limerick and collaborated in this performance to underscore the importance of dance among the Celtic people in both the old and new fashion.

Kieran Jordan, a Philadelphian who has remained in Boston since attending Boston College, obtained a Masters’ from the University of Limerick this past June studying modern dance after starting out as a competitive step dancer and she recruited the other dancers.

There were Maldon Meehan (from Oregon), Ronan Regan (from Galway) and Mats Melin from Sweden but now living in Ireland, who managed to integrate their varied expertise into the show with only a couple of days rehearsal.

Two pieces stood out for me not just for the artistry of the presentation but for the vivid demonstration that you might expect from students of dance.

The first was Cape Breton stepdancing by all four solely to the mouth-music of Navan, and the second a side by side comparison of old (Meehan) versus modern step dancing (Jordan) with a visual clarity that was easily understood even for those without a knowledge of Celtic folk dancing.

In addition, Jordan gave us an interpretative dance mélange that was both graceful and imaginative, growing out of her recent exploration of multiple dance forms to the accompaniment of a slip jig played by Danu.

If there was a sense that we were all invited to an intimate Christmas soiree thrown by the O’Donovan clan, then the singing of 12-year-old Nuala O’Donovan would cap the evening.

Delivering the calypso carol “Mary’s Boy Child’ in a poised and beautiful voice, the tone was set early on that this sojourn around the world through a Celtic prism was an evening to be savored.

With her mother Lindsay also literally behind the scenes playing the piano and the backstage tea kettle, it only reinforced that image that the O’Donovans were gracious hosts to yet another successful holiday hooley.

Wishing all my readers a Nollaig Shona Dhuit and see you back here in 2006!

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December 2005