

# Teatro: Revista de Estudios Culturales / A Journal of Cultural Studies

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Volume 23 *Motivos & estrategias: Estudios en honor del Dr. Ángel Berenguer*

Article 42

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7-2009

## The last bus

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### Recommended Citation

Rafter, Denis. (2009) "The last bus," Teatro: Revista de Estudios Culturales / A Journal of Cultural Studies: Número 23, pp. 595-598.

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■ There was a slight drizzle when he got off the bus at Nelson's Pillar. Nelson's Pillar! He was living in the past. The Pillar was gone now. He had forgotten Dublin's favourite meeting place was blown up a few years after he went overseas. It seemed a lifetime ago. He looked at the clear view now of Henry Street and he thought of Christmas lights, the hucksters, the dealers, the sparklers, the big balloons; the cheap toys in Hector Greys and the cry, "Get da last of yar Pinochioos". He thought he got the smell of fish from Moore Street –but he was too far away for that.

The rain came down heavier and he ran across to Clery's to catch the Number Three. He had not forgotten that, even after twenty years. How could he? For two years he had caught the Three that took him down along Pearse Street until he got off at the Library to go to her house. The number Three with Sandymount Tower written underneath and, on the way back, the last bus into town, the one that went faster because it was the driver's last run, had Nelson's Pillar written on it. But he seldom looked much at the name then –he was usually looking at her.

He was standing in the queue now with the rest of the Dubliners going home to tea. The rush was just starting. He was behind an old woman laden with shopping bags and he felt out of place. He did not want to look different amongst his own people. He was born and bred in Dublin and he wanted nobody to think otherwise. But his clothes were not from Arnott's and his neatly trimmed beard had a foreign look about it. Sure if you go to the trouble of growing a beard why waste time and money getting it cut. In this city a beard is a beard. He hoped in the bit of rain nobody noticed him.

He managed to get a seat upstairs at the back next to the window. There were no young lovers there at this time of the day. Not like on a Friday night after the pictures. The pictures! He had loved the pictures. Ever since he was four when he saw his first Tarzan film at the Queens. He was near the top of Pearse Street now and he glanced out to see if he could see the old Queens Theatre. But that too had gone and with it the last of the variety stars who had first drawn him to the theatre. Mike Nolan and the Crazy Gang and ... but that was a long time ago and he had stood on many a stage himself since then.

He passed the street to Westland Row Church and remembered that the next stop was his. He paid the conductor at the top of the stairs and had to ask him how much it was. The old woman got off too and he gave her a hand with her bags. "Thank ya, mister", she said, "God Bless ya now", then shuffled away home to make her bit of tea before he could ask her if the Brennans still lived in the terrace house

beyond the arches. “Sure they must still live there”, he thought, as he turned and looked across the wide road. Then all the memories came flooding back again. Little had changed. Pearse Street Library still stood solid atop the steps where Johnny Fortycoats used to sit with his bundles. The bus stop was still there –and the shops. “Run down and get us a pound a butter like a good lad”, her mother often said when he was there for tea. And Roisín would throw on her scarf and come with him. “God, can you not let the poor fella alone for a minute”, her mother would call after them. And they would laugh together and she would link his arm and push her face against his sleeve.

The rain had lifted now and he crossed the street and saw the arches not far ahead. He walked slower as he came towards the narrow one where he had first plucked up enough courage to kiss her –and he remembered the gentleness of it all.

What would she say now when she saw him? “I’ve got first night nerves”, he thought. But he knew Roisín would welcome him. Sure he had gone away without any bitterness or row.

“I have to go”, he had told her that night in her parlour as they held each other on the sofa. Then he had told her it was a great chance for him. That although he was doing okay in Dublin with his gigs, the job in New York would open up new opportunities. He would meet all the right people.

“I knew you would want to go away one day”, she had said and then held him tighter and he remembered her warm breath on the back of his hand. She had sobbed quietly and he was too young at twenty to know what to say or do. So he had held her head close to him and patted her short blonde hair and felt awful because he did not want to get tied down.

They had written to each other for a while after he left and on the lonely nights he had often thought of coming back to hold her again near the bus stop on a Spring evening; but they both knew it was all over.

She was the first not to write and he guessed she was serious with someone else. He never asked about her after that. Her life was her own and their going out together was the first love for each of them. But he was back now after all these years and wanted to see Roisín again.

His hand touched the railings outside her house and he stopped at the steps. Her mother was there, polishing the brass. It was a ritual with Mrs. Brennan. What would the neighbours say if her brass wasn’t shiny?

“Mrs. Brennan”, he called gently, “Mrs. Brennan”. The wrinkled hand leaned against the brass knocker and the old white head turned slowly. “Who’s that?” she said,

“God, I can’t see without me glasses. Who is it?”

“It’s me Mrs. Brennan. Don’t you remember the song and dance man?”

“God, it’s not yourself Terry, is it?”, and she was over to him giving him her whiskery kiss.

“It’s lovely to see you again”, she whispered and the old voice broke. But she pulled herself together like she was throwing a shawl over her shoulders and stood back to look at him.

“Well, you haven’t changed a bit, except for the beard. Come inside and have a cup tea”.

They sat down in the kitchen like the old days. She went on about everything but she never mentioned Roisín. She wanted to hear all about him and his acting and how famous he was, but he knew there was something wrong. Finally, he had to ask the question. “And Roisín”, he said quietly looking into his cup, “How is Roisín?”

She foostered at the stove and said, “Ah poor little Roisín’s gone love. Gone when them bombs went off a few years ago. Did you not know? Her name was in the papers. Did you not know? She saw the look on his face and added, “Ah but you wouldn’t have known her marriage name”.

“Roisín”, he said, “She’s dead ... and ...”

“Poor little pet”, she said choking, “never harmed anyone”. “She was married then?” he heard himself say.

“Ah yes, sure you remember Frank Rourke from down the street. He was good to her, Frank. A good man is Frank”. Then she added with her own knowing little smile, “but he never made her laugh like you did”. And the tea went cold while they spoke of the little things they both loved about Roisín.

He was ready to leave when the front door banged. He heard footsteps in the hall and the kitchen door was pushed open. And there she stood before him, Roisín with her bright young face and her neat blonde hair sheltered by the scarf. She looked at him with the same tilt of the head and he waited for her to tease him about drinking tea all day with her mother.

“Rosey will you not come bursting in like that”, said the mother, “this is Roisín’s little girl, Terry. And a right ragamuffin too”.

“Ah Gran, stop giving out”, said the girl, “I ran from the bus stop and look I got you a cake for tea”.

It was her voice with the same little challenge in it. She was taking him in too with the same careful eye.

“This is an old friend of your Mams, God rest her”, said Gran, “This is Terry ...”

"You're the actor", interrupted the girl, "the song and dance man". She was all warmth and friendliness now and he felt at ease again. More tea was made and they ate the cake while he told them funny stories about America and the theatre. He only spoke about the good things. He never mentioned the frustrations and the loneliness. Rosey sat beside him and every so often clapped her hands and said, "I don't believe you", or "Ah I wish me Dad was home to hear you". But Frank was on the late shift on the buses and would not be home until nearly twelve. Then the old lady joked with Rosey about her boyfriends. But Rosey denied she was serious about any of them. He looked at the daughter all the time but it was Roisín he saw. Roisín, when she was seventeen, and they had first met at the dance, at the Royella Club.

Then it was time for him to go. "God", he said, "I'd better go or I'll miss the last bus".

They saw him to the door.

"It was grand to see you again Terry", and the old lady hugged him and touched his face with her own goodbye.

"I'll walk you to the bus stop", said the girl and it was Roisín talking again. She ran to get her coat and was throwing her scarf on as they strolled under the arch. She linked his arm too and said how nice it was that he had come to see her granny and told him that her Dad would be sorry not to have seen him.

There was no one at the bus stop and it was only a few minutes before he saw the double-decker in the distance a few stops away. "You're the image of your mother", he said. "She often spoke to me about you", she laughed. He wanted to ask her more but it was too late now. The bus was nearly there.

"I was with her in the hospital", she said, "just before she died and she ... she said to me she hoped someday I could meet her song and dance man".

There were tears in her eyes now but she smiled through it all, "You made her laugh a lot and I think she missed you". Then she leaned up and kissed him on the cheek and said, "Goodbye Terry".

He was on the bus then looking back at the lone figure standing by the Library steps as the Number Three moved up Pearse Street. "Goodbye Rosín love", he whispered and he closed his eyes on the ghosts of the past as the last bus took him back to the Pillar.