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Distant Music

Comedy/Drama by James McLindon



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Distant Music

Comedy/Drama. *By James McLindon.* *Cast: 2m., 1w.* On a snowy night in an Irish pub in Cambridge, Massachusetts, Connor, Maeve and Dev meet, each agonizing over an irrevocably life-changing decision. Connor, a seemingly cynical Irish-American law professor, has spent much of his life looking for something to believe in, but he's been repeatedly disillusioned, by his faith, the law, and, finally, love. Tonight may be his last chance as he mulls over the prestigious judgeship he's been offered and, far more importantly, the fact that the woman he has always loved, Maeve, a nun, may suddenly be available if she decides to perform a baptism for the child of two gay men in her parish. Dev, the bartender, is an unsettled Irish immigrant whose easy humor and tall tales mask his own dilemma: should he buy the local fish and chips shop with his brother and return to Ireland or admit that America is now his home? The three fight over religion and beer, whether truth exists at all, the differences between the Irish and Irish-Americans, the many failings (according to Dev) of the latter, and, finally, the capacity of stout to explain, metaphorically and metaphysically, most of life. As the evening unfolds, each is eager to tell the others exactly what they should do with their lives and equally resolved not to discuss his or her own. Ultimately, Maeve's determination to force Connor to confront their feelings for each other, and Dev's weakness for eavesdropping on them through the heating vent, bring all three face to face with their futures. *Unit set. Approximate running time: 95 minutes. Code: DB1.*

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DISTANT MUSIC

By
JAMES MCLINDON



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Distant Music was presented by Utah Contemporary Theatre, Salt Lake City, March 7, 2007. Directed by Kirstie Gulick Rosenfield, stage manager John Geertsen with the following:

DEV Cameron Jones
CONNOR Paul Kiernan
MAEVE Susan Dolan

Set Design Kurt Proctor
Lighting Design James M. Craig
Costume Design Daisy Blake
Graphic Design Jeff Winterroth
Voice and Dialect Coach Adrienne Moore

Distant Music was presented by Image Theater, Lowell, Mass., April 13, 2007. Directed by Jerry Bisantz, producers Jerry Bisantz and Ann Garvin, stage manager Ann Garvin, and included the following cast and production staff:

CONNOR CURTIN Phil Thompson
MAEVE MOORE Sally Nutt
DEV HART Jonathan Popp

Set Design Ron Dion
Lighting Design Jon Cipolaro
Sound Design Alex Savitsky
Set Painting Robert Bryan
Graphic Design Karla Sorenson
Set Construction Ron Dion, Ann Garvin, Jerry Bisantz,
Richard Danahy and Matt Descoteaux

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DISTANT MUSIC

CHARACTERS

CONNOR CURTIN. an Irish-American law professor,
early 40s

MAEVE MOORE. Connor's long-time friend,
also Irish-American, same age

DEV HART an Irish bartender, late 20s

SETTING: The back room of the Poul nabrone Pub, an Irish pub in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in the year 2000. The pub is of the sort owned and operated by recent Irish immigrants and has an authentic feel to it, unlike either the Irish-American bars that preceded it in this country or the chain-operated faux Irish pubs that have begun to appear with the inevitability of a bad sequel to a good movie in recent years.

The set may be rendered in a suggestive, minimalist manner or with thorough-going realism. Suggestions for the latter approach follow. A somewhat battered, but presentable, mahogany bar occupies Stage Left. As this is the back room and generally used only on very crowded nights, the bar is probably smaller than the sort of bar that would grace a main room. It has stools in front of it and a few more on the side. Between two of these stools is an old heating vent in the floor. The back wall features a portal that opens onto a short hallway, which in turn, leads to the unseen main room. Off this small hallway are stairs leading down to the cellar and a door leading to the bar's small office.

Stage Right is open, save for a few empty tables and chairs. The outside wall of the pub bounds Stage Right. Coat pegs and a couple of battered dart boards adorn it here and there. A door to the outside is located in the middle of this wall. Windows on either side of the door reveal the snow and wind of a fierce Nor'easter, which accounts for the lack of patrons. Several glowing beer signs—Guinness, Murphy's, Harp, John Courage—hang in the windows. Perhaps one or two more hanging over the sidewalk outside can be seen through the windows. If the snow falling outside the windows can be simulated, it is wonderfully atmospheric.

It is night, late in the millennium, early in the year.

Scene One: A winter's night in early 2000.

Scene Two: A few moments later.

Scene Three: The next night.

He stood in the gloom of the hall, trying to catch the air that the voice was singing and gazing up at his wife. There was grace and mystery in her attitude as if she were a symbol of something. He asked himself what is a woman standing on the stairs in the shadow, listening to distant music, a symbol of. If he were a painter he would paint her in that attitude. Her blue felt hat would show off the bronze of her hair against the darkness and the dark panels of her skirt would show off the light ones. Distant Music he would call the picture if he were a painter.

James Joyce
"The Dead"
Dubliners

DISTANT MUSIC

Scene One

AT RISE: *The lights come up on the interior of the Poul-nabrone Pub in Cambridge, Massachusetts. DEV HART, the bartender, stands behind the bar spraying it with a cleaner and wiping it down. He is in his late twenties, with an accent from the west of Ireland. Good humor is customary with him, but it is also occasionally broken by abrupt flashes of anger. As he works, he sings the last two verses of the mournful ballad “Ta Me ’Mo Shui” (“I Am Awake”) with a gloomy face, switching from English to faulty Irish. (NOTE: See page 72 for melody lines to song.)*

DEV.

Wise men proclaim that lovesickness leaves one
unwell,
I did not believe till my poor heart came under its
spell.
Aicid ro-ghear faraor nar sheachnaigh me I,
Chuir si arraing ’s...
Chuir si arraing ’s...
Chuir si...

Ah, feck my Irish, then!

(Suddenly, bells jingle off, the sort that tells a shopkeeper that someone has entered his store.)

CONNOR *(off)*. Dev?

DEV. I'm cleaning the back room.

(CONNOR CURTIN ENTERS through the portal to the main room of the pub. He is alone, save for the considerable amount of snow that accompanies him. CONNOR, a law professor, is no longer young, but not yet old. His manner often tends toward the cynical and sarcastic, a veneer which only very occasionally peels away enough to reveal the longing beneath. While his words are often despondent, he rarely is. He does not have a Boston accent. He dusts the snow from his shoulders and begins to peel off his coat and gloves, all the while looking around the room, as if for someone. DEV's mood lifts immediately.)

CONNOR. God, it's nasty out there.

DEV. Snow, is it, Professor?

CONNOR. No, Dev, they're having a tickertape parade on Mass. Ave.

DEV. Feck off with ya. You've no call to be taking the piss out of a struggling young immigrant.

(DEV begins to draw a pint of Murphy's stout. CONNOR steps back through the portal to check the front room for patrons.)

CONNOR. Has anyone been in?

DEV. Do ya see anyone? It's the Tuesday after New Year's Eve. With a foot of snow on the ground and two more to come, you're lucky I'm here. Who were you expecting, the Three Wise Men?

CONNOR. Three Wise Men?

DEV. Today's the Feast of the Epiphany, ya feckin' pagan. You're meeting someone, then?

CONNOR. Nope.

DEV. Liar. (*Pouring a pint of stout.*) Murphy's then?

CONNOR. Did your brother call about the chipper?

DEV. No, he didn't. Murphy's then?

CONNOR. Well, call him. Why are you pretending that this isn't a big deal—?

DEV. He'll call when he knows. Murphy's then!?

CONNOR. No, I'm back to Guinness.

(DEV stops, looking unhappily at the Murphy's tap that he has been pulling. After a moment, he resumes.)

DEV. Right, Murphy's it is.

CONNOR. I said I wanted Guinness.

DEV. Well, we all want something we're not going to get. I can't be throwing this out.

CONNOR. Fine, but I won't drink it.

DEV. You're not the man can waste good stout. (*Tearing off a scratch lottery ticket.*) I'll bet you a lottery ticket you'll drink it.

CONNOR. You're on.

(DEV thumps the ticket down on the bar in front of CONNOR and places the two-thirds-full pint on a bar towel by the tap. DEV and CONNOR both watch the

thrashing tan brew in his pint glass slowly resolve itself into a black body and a white head. DEV smiles.)

DEV. Ah, here's a miracle for you. *(He lifts the pint in both hands over his head like a chalice, looking up at it.)* If God were just a bit more theatrical, this is what transubstantiation would look like. There's a very thin line between religion and stout, d'ja know that?

CONNOR *(pause)*. No.

DEV. God's truth, indeed. Something quite foreign to a pathetic, vacillating man such as yourself.

CONNOR. I'm not pathetic and vacillating.

DEV. You are. For a few weeks it's Guinness. Then it's Murphy's. Then it's Guinness again, then Murphy's, then Guinness. *That's* moral weakness. A regular Janus you are, when it comes to stout.

CONNOR. Janus?

DEV. Janus. I've been brushing up on my gods. *(Pause.)* The Harvard Classics Department comes in of a Tuesday. I overhear the odd bit.

CONNOR. So, I change stouts occasionally.

DEV. Variety's fine for some matters. But NOT for the true and timeless things in life... *(caressing a Manchester United scarf hanging behind the bar)* like your football club, now.

CONNOR. Oh, really? Manchester United is forever?

DEV. It is indeed. Forever, it is.

CONNOR. Then how come you were a Liverpool fan "forever" when I met you ten years ago?

DEV. Brilliant young men of ardent heart such as myself often undergo the most radical changes in belief. Read your Joyce, now, you illiterate shite. But in a mid-

dle-aged man like you, well into his fifth decade, such lack of conviction is a bit...well, pathetic! (*Pause.*) Oh, and where's the law professor's well-reasoned retort?

CONNOR (*giving him the finger*). Right there.

DEV. At least I'm capable of deep, if transitory, emotional attachments.

CONNOR. And I'm not?

DEV. Well, isn't that the mystery of ya? You're going to drink this stout now.

CONNOR. You can't force a beer down a man's throat.

DEV. In fact, ya can! These frat lads from MIT taught me. Two of yiz hold the pledge down while the third puts a funnel in his mouth and—

CONNOR. Okay, Dev, look. I am supposed to meet someone here tonight and, and I'd like—

DEV. I knew it! The second miracle of the evening. Your first date since Rachel dropped you—

CONNOR. Rachel did not— It was a mutual agreement. And who said it was a woman? (*Off DEV's dubious stare.*) Okay, so it's a woman. I'd like a little space.

DEV. Would you? So, she's beautiful, then?

CONNOR. Dev—

DEV. Ah, you're in love with her already now, aren't ya!?

CONNOR. Says who?

DEV. Says your face. Like a farm boy spying the village beauty at his first crossroads dance and...waaaait now. This is the one, isn't it?

CONNOR. Which one what?

DEV. The one who broke your heart.

CONNOR. My heart's not broken—

DEV. Ah yeah, bollix that. I figured that out years ago.

CONNOR. Believe what you want, Dev. But just remember, in America, discretion is the hallmark of good bar-keeping.

DEV. So stay out of the Irish pubs, then. And aren't you wrong?

CONNOR. How?

DEV. What about your *Cheers* bar? Wanting everyone to know your name, ya pack of insecure gobshites. In Sligo, the whole village knows your name, your business and your family's business back to Famine times, and don't you wish to God they didn't? (*Pause.*) Ahhhh. There's nothing better than a good argument.

CONNOR. There's lots that's better.

DEV. And there's nothing easier. For every argument, there's a counter-argument. Your ideal bar versus the *Cheers* bar. Matter versus antimatter. Christ versus antichrist...

CONNOR. Logic versus illogic.

DEV. Ah, now, I'm serious here.

CONNOR. Actually, you're right. You've recapitulated legal realism.

DEV. Well...of course I have. You can't stay an eejit long tending bar in Cambridge now.

CONNOR. The law provides no answers, only the arguments. Any smart judge can take the law and make it say "A" or "not A." There is no great truth. And that's the only great truth you learn your first year of law school.

DEV. Or your first year of bartending. Whatever made you go to law school, then?

CONNOR. I don't know.

DEV. Liar.

CONNOR. Well, back then, I thought they did have the truth. (*Embarrassed.*) And, you know, I was a kid...I was going to change the world with it.

DEV. Hah! Our Connor, dirty his hands with the world? Listen, lad, the truth's got nothing to do with changing the world.

CONNOR. Seemed like a good place to start.

DEV. Bollix that! Men change the world with lies. Take your Joe McCarthy now.

CONNOR. He only changed the fifties. The courts were where you could get stuff done back when I started law school. You could take a problem like...like housing discrimination, and make a case against a landlord, and a judge would have to—*have to*—put a stop to it.

DEV. So why aren't you out there putting a stop to discrimination now?

CONNOR. Because Rehnquist, because Scalia, because Thomas. They appointed all these conservatives judges, and we'd bring them the same case and guess what? Turns out, whatever was going on wasn't discrimination after all. And that, Dev, is when I really figured out what the law is.

DEV. What?

CONNOR. It's only the Charlie McCarthy, the ventriloquist's dummy. It's the judge who's Edgar Bergen. I had thought it was the other way around.

DEV. If you really thought it was all just a sham, you should've quit your first year.

CONNOR. Well, there's knowing and there's...accepting. I really wanted to still believe. And I was twenty grand in the hole.

DEV. But how can you teach it?

CONNOR. Oh, teaching the dance steps is easy; selling the dance to an audience, that's the hard part.

(DEV studies CONNOR for a moment or two.)

DEV. You're going to turn down that judgeship. Aren't ya!? They're handing you a chance to change this bloody world...and you're gonna say, no thanks, I'd rather stay buried alive in my law school.

CONNOR. Oh, you're going to lecture me about turning down opportunities—

DEV. A federal judgeship just a step below the Supreme Court is a bit more glorious than a Sligo fish and chip shop!

(CONNOR's response is interrupted by the bells announcing another patron.)

MAEVE *(off)*. Hello?

CONNOR. Maeve. Back here.

(A snow-covered MAEVE MOORE ENTERS through the portal. She is around CONNOR's age and carries a small valise. Like CONNOR, she does not have a Boston accent.)

MAEVE. Connor, you made it. I almost didn't come.

CONNOR. Well, I said I'd be here.

(MAEVE begins peeling off the layers, knocking off the snow and hanging her things on hooks. DEV watches MAEVE's unveiling with great anticipation and little

discretion. She is rather plainly dressed, her only jewelry a small crucifix on a chain around her neck. She is generally upbeat, humorous and playful, but her manner can change from acerbic to sweet to serious in a moment. When necessary, she displays a surprisingly hard edge.)

MAEVE. Thanks for coming. Don't you love Nor'easters!?

CONNOR. No.

DEV. Yes!

MAEVE. I heard it's stalled off the Cape. It's going to snow right on through tomorrow night.

CONNOR. Super. With any luck, classes will be canceled tomorrow.

DEV (*quietly to CONNOR*). Introduce me.

CONNOR. No.

DEV. Fine, then. Good evening, miss. My name is Dev. I'll be your bartender tonight.

MAEVE. Maeve. Nice to meet you. (*She starts to sit on a stool.*)

DEV. Now, don't settle in here, we've got to move back to the main room.

CONNOR. Why?

DEV. What if another customer comes in?

MAEVE. In this weather?

CONNOR. You'd hear the bell.

DEV. Well, I'd have to leave you.

CONNOR. Somehow, we'd soldier on.

DEV. Fine, I'm staying then.

CONNOR. What about your customers?

DEV. Feck 'em, I'll hear the bell. Now, what'll it be?

CONNOR. You want a Guinness?

MAEVE. Sure, anything's fine.

CONNOR. Dev, a Guinness.

DEV (*eyeing MAEVE*). Yes, sir, you'll get what you want here.

CONNOR (*slides his untouched pint over to her*). Have this one.

MAEVE. Oh. Thanks.

(MAEVE takes a sip. CONNOR grabs the scratch ticket, pulls out a coin and begins rubbing the ticket. DEV finishes pouring the first two-thirds of the pint of Guinness and places it on the bar next to the tap.)

DEV. Now, miss, you know we've got to let this settle—
(He notices that MAEVE is sipping CONNOR's pint of Murphy's.) What're ya...! Put that down!!

MAEVE. Excuse me?

DEV. Don't you know that's Murphy's?

MAEVE. Really? I can't tell any difference.

DEV. Can't tell any...? Blessed Mother of All Sweet Feck, help me to bear my American cross. *(To CONNOR.)* Think you're a gas feck, do ya?

CONNOR (*holding up the ticket for DEV to see*). Twenty-five bucks! Pay up.

(DEV slams the new pint of Guinness down in front of CONNOR and storms off, EXITING through the portal and stomping down the cellar stairs.)

DEV. You can top it off yourself, ya wanker!

MAEVE. What was that all about?