

# Welcome Home, Jenny Sutter



**Next Theatre Company** (see Resident companies). By Julie Marie Myatt. Dir. Jessica Thebus. With ensemble cast. 1hr 30mins; no intermission.

After a tour in the Middle East leaves her without her right leg, retired Marine Jenny Sutter (Lily Mojekwu) trades one desert for another. Afraid to go home to her mother and two children, Jenny makes her way to Camp Slab, an abandoned military base in Southern California that's become a campsite for directionless travelers.

Julie Marie Myatt's uneven 2008 drama requires a captivating, grounded lead actor to counteract the wave of quirky characters Jenny encounters at Camp Slab. Tough and weathered, Mojekwu can communicate Jenny's fear of returning home in a single forlorn gaze. The play's strongest moments put Jenny front and center. The silent, tense opening sequence of Jenny dressing herself establishes her uneasy feelings about her prosthesis. Those bottled emotions eventually rush to the surface with devastating force, but the play doesn't spend as much time with Jenny as it should.

*Welcome Home, Jenny Sutter* is both a serious military drama and a kooky outsider comedy; Jessica Thebus's cast strikes a fine balance between the two. The cartoonish supporting figures include a woman addicted to everything (Jenny Avery) and a potentially sociopathic bus-stop worker (Justin James Farley), but Thebus reins in her actors so that the personalities don't go too over-the-top. Still, the script places too much emphasis on these side characters, keeping Jenny Sutter from the homecoming she deserves.—*Oliver Sava*



**HOME NOT ALONE**  
Mojekwu, right, tries to tune out Avery.



**MULTIPLE JOYCE**  
Court's cast deserves a toast.

## SHOW OF THE WEEK

# James Joyce's The Dead



**Court Theatre** (see Resident companies). Book by Richard Nelson. Music by Shaun Davey. Lyrics adapted by Nelson and Davey. Dir. Charles Newell. With ensemble cast. 1hr 40mins; no intermission.

It's easy to think of James Joyce's short story "The Dead," collected in *Dubliners*, as elegiac. In the toast he gives at his aunts' annual Epiphany party, protagonist Gabriel Conroy laments the erosion of Irish hospitality, just as his wife, Gretta, remembers a lost love and, in Richard Nelson and Shaun Davey's powerfully quiet 1999 musicalization, Gabriel eventually mourns his aunt Julia.

Despite these sad notes, Davey and Nelson's adaptation speaks to a reawakening of hopefulness and celebration even amid loss and changing tides. Director Charles Newell and music director Doug Peck had their first collaboration on the Chicago debut of *James Joyce's The Dead* in 2003. I didn't see that

production, but I caught the show's Broadway bow in 2000, which starred Christopher Walken, Blair Brown and Emily Skinner. I was mightily affected by that cast's rendition of Joyce's small, heartfelt tale. And yet, whether by virtue of my dozen intervening years of life and loss or Newell and Peck's rich, ideal cast, *The Dead* hit me harder in this incarnation.

Philip Earl Johnson provides empathetic narration as Gabriel, the

scholar conflicted about his place in his country and, as we learn, in his marriage, with Susie McMonagle turning in magnetic work as Gretta, rediscovering and then revealing a forgotten moment from her own past. The music, performed by the 13-member ensemble with Peck on an upstage piano, subtly transitions from Davey's resettings of lyrics adapted from traditional Irish songs and poems—as the guests of the Misses Morkan might have prepared—to Davey and Nelson's original numbers expressing the characters' inner yearnings. If the rousing, rebellious "Wake the Dead," led by Rob Lindley's vivacious Freddy Malins, doesn't wake something dead in yourself, see a doctor right away.—*Kris Vire*

# The Gifts of the Magi



**Porchlight Music Theatre** (see Resident companies). Book by Mark St. Germain. Music by Randy Courts. Lyrics by Courts and St. Germain. Dir. Mark E. Lococo. With ensemble cast. 1hr 30mins; no intermission.

Like the presents in the titular O. Henry short story, this slight musical holiday card by Mark St. Germain and Randy Courts is undoubtedly well-meant but somewhat lacking in utility.

The authors of the 1984 piece, receiving its Chicago premiere at Porchlight, draw from two Henry stories set in early-20th-century New York City: "The Gift of the Magi" and "The Cop and the Anthem." The latter concerns an eccentric bum named Soapy Smith (Kevin

McKillip), doing his all to get arrested so as to enjoy the holidays in the relative warmth of jail. Soapy's story is contrasted with the better-known tale of the young married couple, Della and Jim, who give up their most prized possessions to buy gifts for each other.

Porchlight's production fares best in the vignettes featuring Jim and Della, warmly portrayed by relative newcomers Chelsea Morgan and Jason Richards; Nate Lewellyn charms as a sort of magical-newsie narrator. But the usually dependable McKillip's vaudeville interludes feel too big for the intimate space, and Courts's score doesn't provide many memorable hooks. Much like the Christmas windows at Marshall Field's (sorry—Macy's), Mark Lococo's staging seems padded out with empty wrapping.—*Kris Vire*



**BRANCH OFFICE**  
Morgan and Richards's tree out-sads Charlie Brown's.

PHOTOS: TOP/LEFT, MICHAEL BROSILOW; RIGHT, KELSEY JORISSEN