

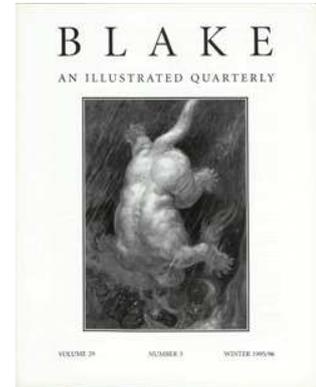
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BLAKE

R E V I E W

Elliott Hayes, *Blake: Innocence and Experience*,
dir. Valerie Doulton

Andrew Lincoln

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Blake: Innocence and Experience by Elliot Hayes, with Michael Loughnan as William Blake. Directed by Valerie Doulton; designed by Gary Thorne; music for songs by Loreena McKennitt. At the Tristan Bates Theatre, Tower Street, London, 12-18 June 1995.

Reviewed by ANDREW LINCOLN

The one-person show is an apt vehicle for representing Blake, since it allows the voice so much freedom to determine the experience of time and space. In this production, the outward eye is repeatedly unsettled by the ear. The lights come up on an elderly man of shabby-genteel appearance—frock-coated, open-shirted, stubbled, balding and unkempt. Before long Blake announces that he is three months from his seventieth birthday, which would put him on (if not beyond) the brink of his death—"an Old Man feeble and tottering." Illness and weakness are figured by the medicine bottle and the occasional grimace, but the vigorous voice negates such evidence. At one point he appears to "fade away" in a chair, wrapped in a sheet—a winding sheet from which there is a semi-comic resurrection. This Blake is at once elderly and youthful, able to travel through the course of his own life at will, a man whose words are drawn in part from letters and poems spanning five decades.

In the restricted space of the Tristan Bates theatre, Michael Loughnan was able to use his full vocal range in making the invisible visible—as when expelling Joshua Reynolds's ghost in thunderous rage, or allowing us to overhear intimate exchanges with Catherine Blake. His enthralling delivery of lines from *America* suddenly transformed the tiny stage into a stormy Atlantic from which Orc arose "Intense! naked! a Human fire"—a vivid demonstration of the voice's ability to govern the eye, and overwhelming proof, should anyone need it, that Blake's prophetic books demand to be heard as well as read. A few of the songs were sung, unaccompanied, to specially composed melodies that Blake himself might have been pleased with. For me, the only point at which the direction faltered was when, as Loughnan recited "The Tyger," he wandered over the stage as if looking for something—a point at which the visual effect was allowed to compete with, and distract from, the voice.

Paradoxically, the very freedom of the voice can help to enforce a sense of the speaker's isolation and self-absorption. This Blake, devoted to recollection and recrimination, asserting his own convictions without fear of interruption (except from the visionary world), confronting and succumbing to his own driving envy, often seems to be addressing a mirror rather than the audience. In this context the familiar stories—of warning Paine to fly to France, of playing at Adam and Eve with Catherine in the garden—appear

as manifestations of a persistent tendency towards self-dramatization. Loughnan develops a convincing portrait of a passionate, tormented and unclubbable individual—one who might even become a hot-eyed bore—always ready to air his own ideas, but less ready to lend an ear to others.

The setting of the play allows the frustration and anger to be seen as manifestations of the selfhood that desire and vision must struggle to overcome. At the back of the stage three paint-covered easels stand like crosses. On the left is Blake's portrait of Catherine, on the right an empty sheet of paper—the focus for a tirade against portrait painting which prompts an exposition of the importance of the bounding line. In the center is Blake's painting "The Angel Rolling the Stone from the Tomb," in which the angel's outstretched arms enact the triumph over the cross. By the end of the play Blake has defined the limits of his own caverned existence: in the final stage picture, he stands with arms outspread, mirroring the angel in the painting behind him.

Any dramatization of Blake must inevitably exclude much. There is little room here for Blake the vulgarian; for the man who claimed to love laughing; for the man given to what is not too explicit ("London" is sung in an early version because, presumably, it seems easier for an audience to absorb). There is little room for the man immersed in the engraver's work, its negotiations and deadlines, its messy physical processes. But the limits of the play, and Valerie Doulton's expert handling of them, make for a portrait that is definite, determinate, and impossible to forget.

Jeanne Moskal, *Blake, Ethics, and Forgiveness*. Tuscaloosa and London: University of Alabama Press, 1994. 240 pp., \$32.95.

Reviewed by STEPHEN COX

On the first page of her book, Jeanne Moskal suggests that consideration of Blake as an ethicist is a challenge to fashionable opinion. Literary scholars, she says, are reluctant to entertain ethical issues, because they are afraid of being led down the garden path to the abyss of "logocentric 'meanings.'" The public, meanwhile, has become convinced that Blake was a great "immoralist."

Moskal clearly exaggerates. The public, insofar as it is acquainted with Blake at all, regards him as the poet of certain commonly anthologized *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, poems which, as presented in most high-school and college classrooms, probably seem far from antinomian. And literary scholarship is in no danger at all of relinquishing its traditional moralism. Even when it claims to relinquish moralism for some higher purpose, such as the subversion of logocentrism, it seldom fails to insinuate that the pursuit