

AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY  
**BLAKE**

R E V I E W

Grant Hehir, *Blake*, a play

Michael J. Tolley

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matter. One can see the genesis of the relief decoration of so many 1930s buildings, and many of the lines of Art Deco furniture in these illustrations.

### Additions to the Blake Apocrypha

**Blake, a play written and directed by Grant Hehir. Music by Bruce Stewart. Performed at the Sheridan Theatre, Adelaide, Australia, 4-20 March 1982.**

**Reviewed by Michael J. Tolley**

Adelaide, Australia, has a biennial Arts Festival in March and this Festival has developed a Fringe and among the Fringe activities in March 1982 was a play called *Blake*, written and directed by Grant Hehir, with music by Bruce Stewart. This play was performed at the Sheridan Theatre on eleven occasions from 4-20 March; I attended the final performance.

The play began promisingly enough with a harangue from a Russian, then one from an Anglican clergyman, who were both led, in celebrating Blake's 1957 bicentenary, to make the claim that he was the greatest genius who ever lived; they were then mocked by a sly bearded rogue calling himself John Joseph Hidson (the star of the show), who claimed to be the cynical alter ego Blake alone could see in his life, a life Hidson bedeviled. Thus we were prepared for amusing situation comedy of the type in which Blake, courting Polly or being patronized by Sir Joshua Reynolds, was goaded into shouting rudely at an invisible interlocutor. In his own person, Blake appeared as a morose, doubting coward, unluckily bearing a bald patch from his tender years and not even allowed a red flourishing wig.

This was a production that breathed the spirit of amateurism, which a full house enjoyed at \$4.50 a head. Eight performers handled all the characters deemed necessary in a rough representation of Blake's life, two of them

playing ten parts each, with the actresses all compelled to play male parts, one pleasant effect of which was, apparently, the adaptation of the character of Tom Paine to a womanish figure. To compensate, Mary Wollstonecraft appeared as a very mannish feminist who made a determined assault on Blake's virtue, Fuseli being inexplicably absent from Johnson's radical circle. The entertainment consisted essentially of a number of Blake's songs, set charmingly to music and, alas, all scranneily sung, interspersed with travestied episodes from Blake's life and illuminated by a double-screen slide projection, some of the slides being rare and excellent, some well-known ones appearing reversed, including the *Europe* frontispiece.

All of those Blakean purists who could not bear the heresies of Adrian Mitchell's *Tyger* would have stormed from the small Sheridan Theatre breathing threats of libel, but we are all so civilized in Adelaide (that is to say, we do not take art seriously here), and it was such a pleasant warm night, and the whole enterprise was so patently harmless in such of its intentions as could be inferred, that even I sat back and chuckled at each fresh absurdity and clapped with the others at the end of each act (there was an interval of fifteen minutes for refreshments: superb orange juice for 40 cents or, in this renowned wine state, plonk for 50).

The unsuspecting credulous members of the audience would have left believing some curious apocryphal facts. Among these are the idea that Blake was, indeed, mad, though this was partly the fault of Hidson who, however, provided Blake with the experience which led to the doctrine of contraries; that the girl he first courted was a tartish model called Polly from the life class at the Royal Academy where he studied with Rowlandson and argued with Reynolds about painting from imagination; that he went to Felpham as an expedient to avoid accepting the position of Royal Engraver (selected by the mad George III on the blind-dab-at-a-moving-list principle), where Mr. and Mrs. Hayley first introduced themselves to him and Catherine (Mrs. Hayley remaining visibly alive and well through the whole trial for sedition); that it was to rescue Catherine from a sexual assault of the drunken Schofield that Blake grappled with the trooper and ejected him from his garden; that Blake was saved from hanging or worse (transportation to Australia) from a hostile judge largely by the Royal-Engraver-selection story; that thereafter Coleridge befriended him, meeting him at the womanish Charles Lamb's house, in the intervals of insulting Wordsworth (Coleridge misremembered Blake's poetry but Blake capped him with a word-perfect recollection of "Kubla Khan"); that Blake died alone, chanting (partly under Parry's inspiration) the famous lyric "And did those feet," which he wrote on his deathbed.