

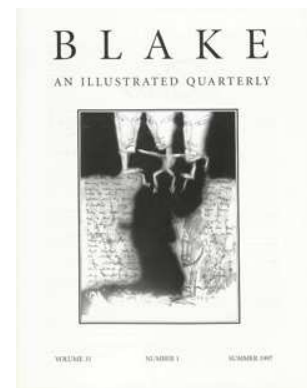
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R E V I E W

George Coates, 20/20 Blake

James McKusick

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sions of *Vala*. In light of Lincoln's book, the physical aspects of the manuscript can no longer be separated from interpretive discussion. This new standard adds a level of sophistication and complexity to considerations of *Vala* that has already emerged in treatment of the illuminated works. Such wide-ranging considerations of the material and thematic complexities encountered when reading this difficult manuscript may also renew our way (or ways) of thinking, talking and writing about Blake.

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20/20 Blake. Written and Directed by George Coates. North American Premiere: Civic Center Theater, San Francisco, 17 January 1997. World Premiere: Teatro Sérgio Cardoso, Sao Paulo, Brazil, 4 September 1996.

Reviewed by JAMES MCKUSICK

20/20 Blake, a dramatic and musical performance based on the life and work of William Blake, recently concluded a production at the Civic Center Theater in San Francisco. Perhaps the most innovative feature of this lush scenic production, written and directed by George Coates, is its digital manipulation of Blake's paintings and engravings to create the illusion of three dimensions when viewed by the audience through special 3-D glasses. Familiar images from Blake's illuminated books are magnified to enormous size and projected onto the stage, thus enabling the performers to walk into, through, and behind the engravings. This technique, initially somewhat disorienting to the observer, is nevertheless effective in drawing the audience

into and across the uncertain boundaries between Blake's lived and imagined worlds.

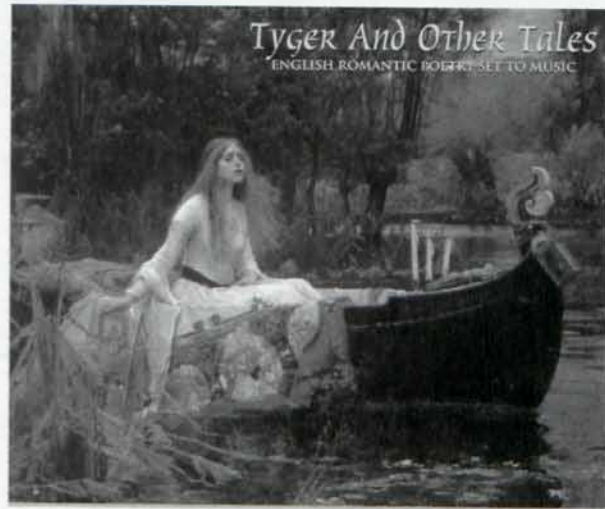
20/20 Blake does not attempt a linear narrative of Blake's life story, but rather presents a series of climactic moments that are vividly realized in choral music performed by the San Francisco Chamber Singers and represented in dance and pantomimic gesture by the actors. The music is challenging and eclectic, weaving together traditional plainsong and orchestral music with elegantly embroidered lyrics from Blake's poetry, and even at times incorporating a four-piece rock-and-roll band with Urizen playing the bass guitar. There is very little spoken dialogue, although Robert G. Kennedy gives a fierce and compelling portrayal of William Blake as a strenuously embattled poet-artist at odds with the universe; he rattles off Proverbs of Hell and related apothegms in a pithy counterpoint to the lush visual and musical texture of each set-piece. The other characters portrayed on stage are his wife Catherine (who doubles as Enitharmon), Mr. Wedgwood (appearing mainly as a villainous enforcer of bourgeois artistic standards), Thel, and Los. The latter two characters provide a lavishly choreographed rendition of their eponymous books, allowing an escapist and frankly erotic fantasy to emerge briefly before it is beaten back into submission by the nay-saying likes of Wedgwood and Urizen.

This production is unlikely to appeal to those Blake scholars who insist on a faithful adherence to Blake's subtlety of design and meaning, since the ethos of his life and work is painted here with rather broad strokes. But this production is both innovative and appealing in its own right, and it does comprise a sustained effort to represent the passionate intensity of Blake's poetry in a dynamic contemporary medium. It certainly reaches out to new audiences who might otherwise never encounter the rich imagery of Blake's illuminated books.

Correction

In Deborah McCollister's article "The Seduction of Self-Abnegation in *The Book of Thel*" in volume 30, #3, pages 90-91, a line was inadvertently dropped. The sentence which read "As Thel searches to discover meaning in the vapor to her their own worth in the life cycle . . ." should have read "As Thel searches to discover meaning in the vapor of mortal life, personified natural elements demonstrate to her their own worth in the life cycle. . ." Also, with regard to her contributor's note: "Less crucial is the note in the 'contributors' section that I will lead a tour to Christian and literary sites in England. Although we southern women have an appreciation for agriculture, I think we'll decline this opportunity on our trip" (letter, 25 March 1997). The word should have been *sites*. Our apologies to Deborah McCollister.

Summer 1997



Tyger and Other Tales

Those with a hankering for soft and smooth "art-rock" renderings of romantic poems will be interested in *Tyger and Other Tales: English Romantic Poetry Set to Music*, a new CD with vocals by Krysia Kristianne, backed by various combinations of guitars, keyboards, bass, drums, and violin. The CD includes a poem each by Blake, Byron, Shelley, Keats, Wordsworth, and Coleridge—plus, less scrupably, two Renaissance lyrics, an instrumental, the last paragraph of *Wuthering Heights*, and an abridgment of Tennyson's "Lady of Shalott." The CD is available from record shops or direct from Sentience Records, 24049 Chestnut Way, Calabasas, CA 91302-2367. \$15.98 + \$2.00 shipping and handling (+ 8.25% sales tax for CA residents). Telephone (818) 591-2709, fax (818) 843-0301.

Blake Society Web Site

On the Blake discussion list (blake@albion.com), Keri Davies, Chair of the Blake Society, announced the URL for the Blake Society:

<http://www.efirstop.demon.co.uk/BlakeSociety/>

Blake Society Program for 1997

22 July, 7: 30 pm, Jeanne G. Moskal, "Forgiving Blake"; 10 August, noon, meeting at Blake's grave at Bunhill Fields; 30 September, 7:30 pm, David Worrall, "Blake's Mrs. Q: A Late Portrait Engraving"; 15 October, 7:30, Joint meeting with the Wilfred Owen Society, Chris Rubenstein, "Blake and Owen in Peace and War"; 28 November, 1 pm, *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*; 4 December, 7:30, General Meeting of the Blake Society; 27 January 1998, 7:30 pm, Terence Watson, "My Course Through Darkness: William Blake and Creative Depression."