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**BLAKE**

R E V I E W

Adrian Mitchell, Tyger

Michael Billington, Morton D. Paley

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as in the poor "Landscape with trees" on plate 36. Indeed, as Sir Geoffrey says, without Frederick Tatham's inscription on it, "it could not be identified as his."

The drawings are adequately reproduced, but the typography has a number of ugly features, especially the plate numbers, which are not only far too heavy for the rest of the type, but tend to distract attention from the drawings themselves. Nevertheless, the book is a bargain and is, moreover, likely to become a standard work.

<sup>1</sup>Cf. Oskar Schlemmer, *Man*, ed. Heimo Kuchling (London, 1971).

Adrian Mitchell. *TYGER*. Produced at the New Theatre, London, 1971.

*Reviewed by Michael Billington and Morton D. Paley. Mr. Billington's review originally appeared in The Times, London, 22 July 1971, under the title "Blake Revitalised" and is reproduced from The Times by permission. Mr. Paley's review appears here for the first time.*

Michael Billington "A celebration of William Blake," is how the programme describes this exuberant and freewheeling extravaganza written by Adrian Mitchell with music by Mike Westbrook, and, although this overlooks the show's undertow of astringency, it accurately sums up its content. It may not win any prizes as the most cohesive entertainment of the year but it has enough theatrical vitality and sheer Dionysiac gaiety to make one overlook its invertebrate structure.

Interweaving past and present with quicksilver fluency, Mr. Mitchell has taken some of the key elements in Blake's life to comment on certain unchanging aspects of the English artistic and political scene. As Northrop Frye pointed out in his brilliant essay on Blake, this great visionary epitomizes the native Protestant-Romantic tradition which takes the individual as the primary field of operations rather than the interests of society; and Mr. Mitchell pursues this line by showing Blake both as the perennial opponent of the Establishment and as a "harmless nut" who believed that God was the divine essence that existed in every man and woman.

Thus we first see Blake as a penurious engraver standing four-square against the ossified traditionalism of the art of his time, against philistine patrons who argue that starvation is essential for the creative artist and against the bureaucratic machine with its wish to classify all human activity. In one of the funniest of all the show's burlesque scenes Blake even applies for a grant to the British Cultural Committee, composed of smooth-faced administrators and female smut-hunters who complain that four-letter words just

leap off the pages of the literary magazines; and, in a characteristic Mitchell phrase, a eunuchoid bureaucrat dismisses the troublesome artist by remarking that "he does tend to bite the hand that has no intention of feeding him."

As long as Mitchell uses Blake as a symbol of the vilified and beleaguered artist, then the show is pungent and alive; and the poet's hatred of all forms of brutality and slavery is movingly evoked in a scene in which Blake leads a group of the permanently oppressed down to the blazing footlights as Mike Westbrook's music reaches a roof-shaking crescendo. Doubts creep in, however, with the attempt to render Blake's vision of a new Jerusalem in concrete theatrical terms. At the end Blake is despatched to the moon in a baroque space capsule that is dismantled by the whole cast and then re-assembled in the form of a chimneyed country house. Blake may have believed in human brotherhood but the building of a Mary Poppins residence seems a weak and inadequate symbol for his vision of a resplendent golden age.

Despite its inability to embody Blake's mysticism and the impression it initially gives that Blake's poetry (as the old lady said of *Hamlet*) is full of quotations, the show still represents an heroic attempt to marry different elements of the English theatrical tradition: musical, panto, satire and cod burlesque. And in one hilarious sequence that is pure Footlights revue the greats of English poetry troop on in grotesque disguises: thus Chaucer becomes an open-air hearty with khaki shorts and a rucksack, Shakespeare a gun-toting cowpuncher and Milton a track-suited disciplinarian advocating a hundred lines before breakfast.

The National Theatre production by Michael Blakemore and John Dexter has the ruthless mechanical efficiency one associates with Broadway musicals and manages the transitions in place and time with astonishing ease; and in a vast company there are suitably broad-scale contributions from Gerald James as the squat, eponymous hero, John Moffat as an insidious cultural middleman and Bill Fraser as a lunatic English sadist. Doubtless Messrs. Mitchell and Westbrook will be said to have gone too far; but, as Blake himself told us, it's the road of excess that leads to the palace of wisdom.

Morton D. Paley (University of California, Berkeley) In Blake's house are many mansions, but does Adrian Mitchell's Blake inhabit any of them? The closest contact the show makes to the poet and artist of that name is in the extraordinary physical resemblance of Gerald James to Linnell's portrait of 1825--that and Isabelle Lucas's moving singing of verses from "London" and *Jerusalem*. Otherwise what we get is an occasionally funny, frequently boring piece of anti-Establishment nose-thumbing in the guise of "a celebration of William Blake." If *Tyger* succeeded in an imaginative transformation of its material, one wouldn't care much about its literal truth or falsehood, any more than, say, one cares about the historicity of Brecht's *Galileo*. But for the most part the spirit of Blake is

scanted here as much as the letter: Mitchell's giving the Blakes a child for his own purposes is one thing, but the spectacle of Blake building Jerusalem on the moon instead of in England's green and pleasant land gives one pause.

As the stance of the show is deliberately "anti-intellectual"--that is to say, anti what Adrian Mitchell mistakes for being intellectual--it should be emphasized that *Tyger's* weakness is not its contemporaneity. In "a celebration" one is prepared to enjoy a Klopstock *cum* cultural master-of-ceremonies, especially as gleefully pranced by David Ryall. The scene in which Sir Joshua Rat lectures on Civilisation on the pub tv while Mr. Blake mutters annotations (though admittedly precious few of them) is genuinely funny; even Scofield's appearance as the bouncer is mildly funny; but when Blake holds Scofield off with the coal scuttle, one gets the feeling that something has been lost. Again, there is an amusing scene before the Arts Council, three Negations who give 10,000 pounds to Evelyn Graze, transvestite mod editor, but who are put to sleep by Mr. Blake's reading from *Jerusalem*. Best of all, perhaps, is the episode in which Scofield tempts Blake to pity by abusing an ingenious mechanical dodo in a super-market shopping cart. This is Mitchell at his best, but there is much more of Mitchell at his worst. When our hero advertizes for lovers, he gets three kinky dames in black leather who seem more an answer to Leopold Bloom's prayers than W. B.'s; and the Blakes' marital crisis is solved by a hunt through an anatomical dictionary, culminating in the discovery of--the clitoris! This, in addition to portraying Blake as a sexual nincompoop, manages to evade what Blake himself tells us about his marital problem and its solution--but to talk about Sacrifice of Self in the West End in the year 1971 would cost a man his life, or at least his reputation for trendiness.

In Act II most pretense to any relation between *Tyger* and Blake is abandoned. Eight of the twelve songs are by Mitchell, but this is merely an indication. A large part of the Act is a variety show in which figures named after poets appear: a nondescript Chaucer, Shakespeare with six-guns, Milton wearing a "Paradise Now" sweat-shirt, to be joined by a bunch of swingers named Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley, and Keats. Then come "the late Victorians" wearing white ducks, striped jackets, and straw hats--one of these five is "Walt Whitman"! Allen Ginsberg alone appears at home. The silliness of all this is relieved for a short time by a conversation between Sir Joshua and Mad King George the Fiftieth. Mad King George, as it turns out, loves nothing so much as to see, cause, ruminate on, and enjoy the prospect of children being beaten. The trouble is that as the conversation goes on, one becomes more and more aware of the prototype of Mad King George --not Nobodaddy but Jarry's Père Ubu, a derivation that Bill Fraser's brilliant performance seems to recognize and build on, cocking the head and strutting while delivering sadistic *sententiae*. Perhaps *Tyger* may be followed by a celebration called *Merde*, but meanwhile one can't help reflecting on how much more daring and more talented

Jarry was than Mitchell.

In the last part of Act II, we actually get back to Blake, and here alone (with perhaps the exception of slides occasionally shown) a Blakean prop is used--the winged ark of *Jerusalem* 39. Mad King George having decided to get rid of Blake by sending him to the moon ("A British rocket will never come back"), Blake agrees provided he can substitute his own landing vehicle and name his own flight controllers. The latter are Henry Fuseli (portrayed for some reason as a generation younger than Blake) and Samuel Palmer; the landing vehicle is the moon ark. For a few moments, as the ark is opened and Jerusalem starts a-building, aided by (ostensibly) Lunarians while Isabelle Lucas beautifully sings, one feels close to Blake --but as with everything else in this production, the moments become minutes, many, many minutes, and then even after the curtain calls, the scene goes on and on to Mike Westbrook's unutterably banal music.

The theatre program should be added to the list of Blakean ephemera. It includes a page of selective Blake chronology, two pages of anecdotes and quotations, a reproduction of the 1821 Linnell portrait, a page of "Quotes by Blake," full-page reproductions of the first and twenty-first *Job* engravings, three photographs of one of the life masks, and a page and a half of quotations headed "Blake and Slavery."

Ruthven Todd. *WILLIAM BLAKE THE ARTIST*. Studio Vista/Dutton Pictureback. London: Studio Vista; New York: Dutton, 1971. Pp. 160, illus. £1.80 hardbound, 80p paper. \$2.25 paper, U.S.

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Ruthven Todd has been something of a legend to students of Blake, and this book is his most lengthy contribution to Blake studies for many years. Most people who have been lucky enough to get hold of his long out-of-print *Tracks in the Snow* treasure it as one of the few classics on the subject of English Romantic painting, particularly on the painters of the Sublime, of whose company Blake was proud to regard himself a member.

The present book is an excellent if unconventional introduction to Blake, for it concentrates not on the interpretation of the Prophetic Books, but on Blake as a craftsman working within the limitations of his situation as a penurious engraver. The book follows the career of Blake year by year, and a picture of the man emerges, not just as a visionary, but as a proud and even defiant craftsman, prepared to take on any engraving work to give himself time to work on his visions. Even in his last illness nothing persuaded him to put down the large folio in which he was making the