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MAGIC AND MEDICINE: Dannie Abse's Pythagoras (Smith) set to cast a spell at Pentameters



Dannie Abse

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by RUTH GORB

It has been one of the pleasures of literary life in Hampstead to hear Dannie Abse reading his poetry at Pentameters Theatre. Now there is another treat in store: Pentameters' artistic director, Léonie Scott-Matthews, is to stage an Abse play, Pythagoras (Smith).

Dannie Abse is, of course, best-known and loved as a poet, one with a string of awards, the most recent a CBE for his services to literature and poetry.

But playwriting goes back a long way: admirers may well know about his youthful (and continuing) passion for Cardiff City football team; what they may not have heard about is his love of the theatre as a schoolboy, or the days when as a young medical student he reviewed off-West-End plays, in a "seat in row G among a sparse audience".

He began writing plays as long ago as 1948, and subsequent productions had him linked with Beckett and Pinter.

Over the years Abse's collected volumes of poetry and his peerless autobiographical writing gained him an international reputation, and he continued to write plays – with some hiccups along the way.

In 1973 he was writer in residence at Princeton University and his play The Dogs of Pavlov was put on in New York and well-received. This encouraged him to write Pythagoras (Smith), and he was asked if he would direct the play at Birmingham Rep. "Then there was the prospect of a transfer to the National Theatre.

The season comprised Measure for Measure, Le Malade Imaginaire – and me." He roars with laughter. "Then, guess what? Birmingham had a huge central-heating bill to pay. They had to drop one play – mine."

Their loss, and our gain. Pythagoras (Smith) promises to be a Pinteresque mix of menace and humour.

Its theme has been described as the clash between patient and doctor, medicine and magic, its central character one Tony Smith who re-names himself Pythagoras and



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who is a stage magician.

The setting is a house called The Cedars where Tony is putting on a show for the inmates and their families. "One scene," says Abse, "harks back to when I was a doctor and visited what in those days one called lunatic asylums. Did it distress me? I was fascinated. I could not imagine life without central aim or purpose. One uses one's experience all the time."

As he does in his poetry, work which is universal and yet intensely personal. It celebrates his Welshness, and his Jewishness ("Dear love," he famously wrote, "Auschwitz made me more of a Jew than Moses did"); it expresses his love of nature, of music, of family, and yes, of football, and he has written most movingly of marriage, of the deep happiness it brought him, and the pain of its loss.

The disparate elements of his life – he was for years a chest doctor before giving it up to write full time – are always underlined with humanity and love and an essential optimism. "Thanks be. I'm lucky to be here," he writes in his poem "Valediction", although in the same breath he describes old age as an exile, of living between nostalgia and rage.

There is no sense of him giving in to nostalgia. He works obsessively, says he will write anything – plays, articles, criticism, reviews, novels – as long as he keeps writing. "I have to fill in with other things between poems. You can't write poetry by appointment. You have to wait. Something will come.

"All literature starts with a dramatic impetus, but in a poem characters are silhouettes; in a play they relate to other characters. How to define poetry? Perhaps as the first words Adam spoke to Eve.

You use words differently, but prose has its own rhythms. You can go into a poem sober and come out drunk – but so you can with a play."

The intellect flashes out occasionally from an almost boyish diffidence. He is the most modest of great poets, and has lived in the same house in Golders Green since 1957 – although there was a more raffish period of his life when he was part of the café society literati of Swiss Cottage in the 1940s, a time and a place when his fellow countryman Dylan Thomas would hold court.

He has been attending rehearsals of Pythagoras (Smith) – "I think I can be helpful." And there is another collection of poetry on the way. He shakes his head and says he is beginning to feel time's winged chariot...
As I leave his house he points out with delight a white clematis in full bloom round the porch. "Joan must have planted it 25 years ago. It's never flowered before. It's a sort of miracle. It's given me the start of a new poem..."

- Pythagoras (Smith) runs from May 29-June 17 at Pentameters Theatre, 28, Heath Street, Hampstead, Tuesdays-Saturdays 8pm, Sundays 5pm, tickets £12, concessions £10, box office 020 7435 3648, www.pentameters.co.uk



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