

Ham&High



William Blake celebrated in Hampstead on his birthday and beyond

Mary Kate Brogan
 Wednesday, November 28, 2012
 1.22 PM

Pentameters Theatre are celebrating William Blake this week with a series of events

Few knew of William Blake, the poet, artist and musician, during his lifetime, but this week many poets, artists and musicians are celebrating the anniversary of his birth. Possibly the largest collection of those celebrating is a group of performers who've created a six-day-long Blakean poetry festival.

Mental Travellers, which runs from to December 2 at Pentameters Theatre, is a mix of poetry, performance and song. The organisers have divided up the festival to offer different types of performance every night.

"You have a festival that sort of embraces people that are drawn to Blake for all of those different reasons," says John Gibbens, poet, songwriter and co-organiser of the festival, "so you've got a very diverse set of performers there. And Blake provides, if you like, a centre of gravity that [draws] sort of diverse artists together."

The Sunday afternoon of the festival will be devoted not so much to Blake but to a Blakean figure, the late poet David Gascoyne.

"[Gascoyne] was a Hampstead poet for a long time, and four people will celebrate his life and work, including the author of David Gascoyne's biography [Robert Fraser]," says Niall McDevitt, poet and co-organiser, "so for me this will be a fascinating evening finding out more about a really great poet who isn't that well-known."

Gascoyne, like Blake, was a bit of an outsider, and the festival features some other Blake admirers who are "mavericks" in the literary scene, Gibbens says. Blake has become more and more well-known for encouraging outsider artists, which is part of the reason many artists and poets embrace him.

"I think Blake gives courage and inspiration to people to be of independent vision and not to be discouraged or belittled by the terms of social acceptance," Gibbens says.

McDevitt says that, while people might be less motivated to see poets perform than, say, a great rock band, the festival will offer both food for thought and entertainment for the audience.

"It won't be a stodgy, dull, slightly tedious type of poetry reading," McDevitt says. "It'll be full of vibrancy and thought and brilliancy."

Shows are at 8 pm daily and at 5 and 8 pm on Sunday at Pentameters Theatre, 28 Heath Street, Hampstead, London NW3 6TE. Tickets are £8-10. For more information or to book tickets, call 020 7435 3648.

Dates for the festival

Wednesday, November 28: Night of Delicious Songs (Blake's birthday)

Thursday, November 29: Take This Hammer

Friday, November 30: Visions for the World Tree

Saturday, December 1: 64,000 Genii

Sunday, December 2 (5 pm): An Evening without David Gascoyne

Sunday, December 2 (8 pm): The Tigers of Wrath

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