

British Theatre Guide

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Romantics

James Veitch

Pale Fire Productions

Keats House Garden, Hampstead

(2011)

This is an alfresco celebration of Romantic poets and poetry centred on those linked to this Regency house where Keats lived for a time, falling in love with Fanny Brawne who lived next door. It draws on their letters, verse and prose to provide a series of biographical scenes that interweave with their poetry. It is not just these Regency romantics that it celebrates; it also looks forward to the twentieth century with Bob Dylan and Stevie Smith, to America for a Bob Dylan lyric and Edgar Allen Poe and includes a visit by Robert Burns to London.

Audiences are encouraged to bring a picnic to enjoy before or during the performance, sitting on the lawn - a single bench is the only other seating. The opening performances were on a day of heavy rain but it held off for the afternoon performance and in the evening the sun broke shyly through. With picnic rugs provided to lay on the damp ground for those who had not brought their own and umbrellas in case they should prove necessary, the producers are prepared for all except really heavy downpours.

The performance opens with Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner", given a stylized physical staging by Veitch as director (and further extracts from that poem are interspersed later in the programme). It then presents Coleridge himself, reeling from the effects of the opium he took dissolved in whisky, and coming up with "Kubla Khan". Ben Crispin plays both Coleridge and the Ancient Mariner to great effect, also appearing later as Shelley, Poe and Burns.

The famous interruption of "Kubla" by 'the person from Porlock' leads to Stevie Smith's musing on what really happened. Not all the links are quite so well signalled but the programme flows smoothly between verse, commentary and re-enactment as we meet Shelley, Hannah Moore's Mary Shelley and Richard Holt's Byron with their ghost stories competition, hear Mary's musings as she thinks up Frankenstein, and his friends experience Shelley's drowning.

James Scott plays William Blake and the voices of the company come from all around as the speak "Tyger Tyger" making the evening light into the 'forests of the night' and they give us Parry's setting of "Jerusalem". Byron takes a lady spectator's hand to deliver "She Walks in Beauty" to her, Denholm Spurr's Keats gives us the "Ode to a Nightingale" in the very garden where its inspiration sang. "How Pleasant to Know Mr Lear" gives us the poet's own caricature of himself and there is an acted out version of "The Owl and the Pussycat" complete with gobbling turkey A scene with an inebriated Wordsworth and painter Haydon seems a little contrived but it also gives us Evelyn Adams as Fanny Brawne, amusingly desperate for Keats to come and woo her, her plans thwarted by the painter.

It is great to find a group of young actors up to the vocal challenge of open air performance and able to span the range from bold declamation to intimate conversation, though when playing from

near the house they sometimes need a little more projection to reach the furthest part of the audience. Cellist Tatiana Judycka makes a considerable contribution both in interconnecting passages and sometimes discretely supporting the speaking with matchingly romantic music. The dialogue of the recreations of real incidents, or sometimes perhaps imagined ones, does not always seem entirely natural but it is full of interest and humour and the whole comes together to make an entertaining 75 minutes. A very pleasant way of passing a summer evening, even more enjoyable if the weather is more summery.

"Romantics" plays at Keats House on Saturdays and Sundays until 31st July 2011

Reviewer: [Howard Loxton](#)