The Tiger Lillies

Rime of the
Ancient
Mariner

after Samuel Taylor Coleridge

with visuals by Mark Holthusen

UK premiere

This performance is dedicated to the
life and memory of Graeme Gilmour
(29 September 1964 — 23 March 2013)

Thu 23 May 2013, 8.00pm
Brighton Dome Concert Hall

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Rime of the Ancient Mariner

The Tiger Lillies and Mark Holthusen

Martyn Jacques
vocals, accordion, piano, ukulele

Adrian Stout
double bass, musical saw, theremin, vocals

Mike Pickering
drums, percussion

Animation and photography
Mark Holthusen

Lighting design
Begoña Garcia-Navas,
James Loudon

Stage manager
Pete Sach/Rebecca Anson

Video/Lighting
David Bernard

Sound
Claus Buehler

Production photographs
Mark Holthusen

Production
La Maison de la Musique de Nanterre (France), The Tiger Lillies (UK), Quaternaire (France)

Co-production
Théâtre de Nîmes — scène conventionnée pour la danse contemporaine (France); Scène Nationale de Sète et du Bassin de Thau (France)

World premiere, La Maison de la Musique de Nanterre, France,
16 March 2012

The Tiger Lillies
quaternaire

Maison de la Musique de Nanterre
Synopsis

For killing an albatross, the mariner and his crew are punished with drought and death. Amid a series of supernatural events, the mariner’s life alone is spared and he repents. His penance is to wander the earth and tell his tale with the lesson that ‘all things great and small’ are important.

He prayeth best, who loveth best
All things both great and small;
For the dear God who loveth us,
He made and loveth all.
# Song List

1. Overture
2. Seven Seas
3. The Storm
4. Cabin Boys
5. Land of Ice
6. Albatross 1
7. Albatross 2
8. Hypocrites
9. Water Water
10. Albatross 3
11. Death Maiden
12. Death ship
13. Palace by the sea
14. Rotting Flesh
15. Drifting
16. In the Waves
17. Dead Man Ship
18. Cape of Good Hope
19. Living Hell
20. The Ancient Mariner
Coleridge’s Ballad of Enduring Fascination

The *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* is one of the most famous poems in English, and certainly the most famous poem by Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772–1834). First published anonymously in 1798 — in *Lyrical Ballads*, the collection of poetry that Coleridge planned and wrote with his friend William Wordsworth — the poem is at once a meditation on crime and punishment and a story about story-telling.

In old age Wordsworth recalled how he and Coleridge, while walking to the Somerset village of Watchet in November 1797, had conceived a ballad in which ‘some crime was to be committed which should bring upon the Old Navigator… spectral persecution… and his own wanderings’. Prompted by his recollection of an episode in an 18th-century travel narrative, Wordsworth suggested that the crime should be the killing of an albatross. The two poets’ attempt to compose the poem collaboratively quickly faltered, however, and Coleridge wound up writing it on his own. Contemporary reviewers of *Lyrical Ballads* singled out *The Rime of the Ancymeat Marinere* (printed thus with mock-archaic spelling) as the most original — and the most baffling — poem in the volume. Coleridge’s brother-in-law, the poet Robert Southey, condemned it as ‘a Dutch attempt at German sublimity’, and Wordsworth himself was sufficiently troubled by its oddity to demote it to a less prominent position in the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads*. But no other poem in the collection was to exercise as profound a hold on the public imagination.

The basic plot is quite simple, conforming to what the American critic Robert Penn Warren once described as an archetypal pattern of spiritual death and rebirth. Buttonholing a man on his way to a wedding feast, the eponymous Mariner ‘holds him with his glittering eye’ and proceeds to recount his fateful voyage. His ship had been blown off course and was drifting near the South Pole when an albatross suddenly appeared and was hailed by the sailors as a good omen. But once ‘a good south wind’ had begun to blow the ship northwards, with the albatross following, the Mariner unaccountably shot the bird with his crossbow, enraging the other sailors:

*For all averred, I had killed the bird*

*That made the breeze to blow.*

Abruptly the wind died and ship was stranded in the middle of the ocean under a parching sun:

*Water, water, every where,*

*And all the boards did shrink;*
Above and overleaf, illustration by Gustave Doré (1832–88) for The Rime of the Ancient Mariner
Water, water, every where,
Nor any drop to drink.

The sailors hang the albatross, ‘Instead of the cross’, round the Mariner’s neck to punish him, but a worse punishment awaited. Another ship approached — a spectral ship piloted by two skeletal figures whom the Mariner recognized as Death and Life-in-Death:

Her lips were red, her locks were free,
Her locks were yellow as gold:
Her skin was white as leprosy,
The Night-mare Life-in-Death was she,
Who thickens man’s blood with cold.

The two figures cast dice, and Life-in-Death won, claiming the Mariner as her prize. So while the other sailors now died, the Mariner was kept alive, cursed, as he thought, by the unclosed eyes of his shipmates. For seven days he continued in that state until, noticing the ‘watersnakes’ swimming round the ship — earlier he had thought them repulsive — he suddenly felt an upsurge of love and ‘blessed them unaware’. Thereupon he was able to pray,

And from my neck so free
The Albatross fell off, and sank
Like lead into the sea.

Thus ends the first half of the Mariner’s story. In the second half, having thoroughly terrified the wedding guest (who is of course missing the feast), the Mariner recalls that the weather broke, bringing rain, and he fell asleep:

O sleep! it is a gentle thing,
Beloved from pole to pole!

He awoke to find that his shipmates, their bodies now occupied by angelic spirits, had resumed their former duties, enabling the ship to sail again: ‘We were a ghastly crew’. When the ship reached the equator, the Mariner fell into a swoon in which he heard two voices discussing his fate. The second voice said,

‘The man hath penance done,
And penance more will do.’

The ship then returned to the Mariner’s native land, where it sank and the Mariner was rescued by a harbour pilot and a hermit. But what ‘penance more’ meant became clear only when the hermit asked him, ‘What manner of man art thou?’

Forthwith this frame of mine was wrenched
With a woful agony,
Which forced me to begin my tale...
At that point the Mariner understood — and at this point in the narrative we now realize — that he was condemned to repeat his story eternally. He is a compelled and compelling narrator:

I pass, like night, from land to land;
I have strange power of speech;
The moment that his face I see,
I know the man that must hear me:
To him my tale I teach.

The poem concludes with the Mariner’s lesson to the wedding guest:

He prayeth best, who loveth best
All things both great and small;
For the dear God who loveth us,
He made and loveth all.

The poem surely owes its enduring fascination to its arresting imagery, its memorable diction and its profound ambiguity. The best-known image in the poem, of the slain albatross hung round the Mariner’s neck, has entered the English language itself as a figurative meaning of the word ‘albatross’, acknowledged by the *Oxford English Dictionary*: ‘A source or mark of misfortune, guilt, etc., from which one cannot (easily) be free; a burden or encumbrance’.

The poet Anna Letitia Barbauld, an older contemporary of Coleridge’s, complained that the *Rime* was improbable and had no moral. Coleridge famously responded on separate occasions to both points. First, he explained in his critical and philosophical book *Biographia Literaria* (1817), the poem demands ‘that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith’: that is, we should accept its supernatural elements at face value and not try to rationalize or allegorize them away. Second, he countered that the poem had, if anything, too much of a moral. But one can understand Barbauld’s disquiet. The arbitrary determination of the Mariner’s fate and the extraordinary nature of his ‘punishment’ tend to undermine the simple moral lesson he infers from his narrative.

What is more, nothing in the poem itself actually confirms the Mariner’s interpretation of the events he narrates: he simply assumes he is being punished for killing the albatross. Only the prose gloss that Coleridge added in 1817, when he published a revised version of the poem under his own name, flatly asserts the connection between the albatross’s death and the Mariner’s eternal life, thereby highlighting how uncertain that connection was in the first place. As a reflection on the origin of evil, the possibility and nature
of atonement, the fellowship of life, and the limits of communication, the poem leaves open the questions it raises. The wedding guest, we are told in the poem’s final stanza, wakes the next morning ‘A sadder and a wiser man’ — but why is he sadder and how is he wiser?

Coleridge himself observed that The Rime of the Ancient Mariner is unique and ‘cannot be imitated’. But while this is true, the poem has repeatedly inspired other artists to quote, illustrate, adapt, appropriate, honour and parody it. The process began during the poet’s lifetime: in Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein (1818) the narrator Walton promises to ‘kill no albatrosses’ and Viktor Frankenstein himself quotes from the Rime. The albatross later found its way into poems by Charles Baudelaire (L’Albatros’, 1859) and D.H. Lawrence (‘Snake’, 1923), while the narrator of William Burroughs’s Naked Lunch (1959) compares himself with the Ancient Mariner; and the vampire Louis in Anne Rice’s Interview with the Vampire (1976) compares the eternal child Claudia with Life-in-Death. The first filmed version of the Rime, combining a recitation by Sir Michael Redgrave with animations by Ray daSilva, was produced by Raúl daSilva in 1975, and as recently as January of this year a recitation of the ballad by Fiona Shaw was staged in the Old Vic Tunnels, underneath Waterloo Station. By far the most popular films appropriating elements of the Rime — such as the dice-game and the slimy water-snakes — are Disney’s Pirates of the Caribbean trilogy (2003–7).

Among illustrations of the Rime, Gustave Doré’s 39 woodcuts (1876) are the best known, but the first artist to illustrate the poem was David Scott, whose drawings of 1831–2 (which failed to impress Coleridge, who particularly did not want the Mariner depicted as an old man) were etched and published in 1837. In the 20th century the poem attracted illustrators as diverse as David Jones (1929), Duncan Grant (1945) and Alexander Calder (1946). More recently the ballad has been recast by Hunt Emerson as a comic book, with a disconcertingly smiling albatross on its cover (1989), and by Nick Hayes as The Rime of the Modern Mariner (2011), an environmentally themed graphic novel.

Musical appropriations and adaptations of the poem have not been lacking, either. Some of these, like Fleetwood Mac’s song ‘Albatross’ (released as a single in 1968, and a year later on the compilation album The Pious Bird of Good Omen — a quotation from Coleridge’s 1817 gloss on the Rime) have only an indirect relation to the poem. But others, like Iron Maiden’s ‘Rime of the Ancient Mariner’ (released on the Powerslave album in 1984) and the Pogues’ ‘Turkish Song of the Damned’ (1988) engage with the poem much more directly, through quotation and allusion.
The Tiger Lillies’ multimedia presentation *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, combining original music and lyrics with animated visual images taken from the poem (the albatross, the Mariner with his crossbow), is thus the latest participant — an inventive, fascinating one — in the long and extraordinarily varied reception of Coleridge’s ballad. It is further proof that, after over two centuries, the Ancient Mariner continues to hold us in his thrall with his long grey beard and glittering eye and strange power of speech.

© Nicholas Halmi

Nicholas Halmi is lecturer in English literature of the Romantic period at the University of Oxford; among his publications is a Norton Critical Edition of Coleridge’s Poetry and Prose (2003).
Biographies

The Tiger Lillies
Martyn Jacques, The Tiger Lillies’ founder, frontman and songwriter, spent most of his 20s in a flat above a brothel in Soho, peeping through his window at the buzz of London’s lowlife. It took him a good ten years to turn that strange world into art, while training as a singer and songwriter. In 1989 he got his first accordion, and The Tiger Lillies were formed shortly afterwards. An immediate standout thanks to their distinct sound and style, The Tiger Lillies worked their way up from London pubs to the Piccadilly Theatre, from buskers’ benches to the Sydney Opera House. Soon the band was touring the world, giving concerts and participating in various art and theatre projects. Their many highlights include an Olivier Award for Best Entertainment in 2002 for the cult hit musical *Shockheaded Peter* and a Grammy Award nomination in 2003 for the album *The Gorey End*.


The world of The Tiger Lillies is dark, peculiar and varied, with moments of deep sadness, cruel black humour and immense beauty. This ‘anarchic Brechtian street opera trio’ tours the world playing songs about ‘anything that doesn’t involve beautiful blonde girls and boys running in the meadow’, to quote Martyn Jacques. Their songs therefore cover all the dark aspects of life, from prostitution and drug addiction to violence and despair. Never without a touch of twisted humour and sharp irony, The Tiger Lillies’ point an implicit accusing finger back at us: what on Earth are we doing, laughing at this stuff?’. Their music is a mixture of pre-war Berlin cabaret, anarchic opera and gypsy music, echoing the voices of Bertolt Brecht and Jacques Brel.

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Martyn Jacques vocals, accordion, piano, ukulele

Martyn Jacques, the founder of The Tiger Lillies, is a self-trained musician and singer, playing mostly the accordion, piano and ukulele. His falsetto voice has become The Tiger Lillies’ trademark and, combined with his dark and edgy song-writing style, has led to him being known as the ‘Criminal Castrato’. He has composed music for and performed in numerous shows all over the world, working with artists of all disciplines, from highbrow theatre and experimental dance to circus, burlesque and puppetry; he is proud of the fact that The Tiger Lillies have performed in opera houses and rock festivals as well as in pubs and circus tents. His music has been used in films (including Plunkett and Macleane, Luftbusines and Drunken Sailor, Return To Nuke ‘Em High) and recently he composed music for the silent film The Cabinet of Dr Caligari, which he performed as a live accompaniment in his first solo show. He has been commissioned by the American photographer Nan Goldin to compose an original score for her Ballad of Sexual Dependency slideshow project, and has performed the piece with The Tiger Lillies as a live soundtrack to her startling images. His work has been nominated for a Grammy Award (The Gorey End in 2003), and he won an Olivier Award for Best Performance in a Supporting Role for his memorable turn in Shockheaded Peter.

Adrian Stout double bass, musical saw, theremin, vocals

Adrian Stout played blues, jazz, country and other primitive musical forms in various known and lesser-known bands throughout the UK and Europe, and as far afield as India, and recorded two albums for the blues diva Dana Gillespie before being co-opted by The Tiger Lillies for the 1995 Edinburgh Festival Fringe. Since then this once-serious musician has found himself dancing in lederhosen, making love to inflatable sheep and dressing as a cheap prostitute. He has occasionally been spotted playing with Stuart A. Staples of the Tindersticks. He also works with Sexton Ming, with whom he co-wrote all the songs of the album Taste of Wood. The album was recorded, mixed, produced and mastered by him and was released in 2007 on his and Sexton’s Crapping Clown label.

Mike Pickering drums, percussion

Mike Pickering joined The Tiger Lillies in spring last year, when founding member Adrian Huge decided to take a leave of absence. He has since played the drums, percussion and all the other toys and instruments inherited from his predecessor in all of the band’s live performances, as well as in the recording of The Tiger Lillies’ most recent album, Either Or. He started playing drums when he was 12 and has played with many of the UK’s finest jazz musicians. Since 1994 he has been a member of the Billy Jenkins Blues Collective, the Voice of God Collective and, more recently, Trios WAH! with saxophonist Jason Yarde and the bass man Larry Bartley. He has recorded soundtracks for numerous films, including Captain Corelli’s Mandolin (in which he also appears, briefly) and Charlotte Grey (in which he doesn’t). He has played and recorded with the house DJs A Man Called Adam, the rock band Strangeways, Nigel Birch’s Flea Pit Orchestra and the country musicians Bobby Valentino, and Hank Wangford and The Lost Cowboys.

Mark Holthusen animation, photography

Distinct in both style and technique, the San Francisco-based photographer Mark Holthusen is best known for creating images that push the boundaries of traditional photography. After receiving his BFA in Photography and Sculpture in 1993, he began his career in the Czech Republic, returning to San Francisco five years later to co-found a leading digital photography studio. Recognized for his creative innovation at the intersection of arts and technology, he has collaborated on numerous projects, including creating a visual narration for Roger Waters’s opera Ça ira and working on advertising campaigns. Merging digital ingenuity and boundless imagination, his images evoke an elegant, painterly atmosphere.
Brighton Dome & Brighton Festival

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