

Venice's jewel, Beyond Baroque.

SANTA MONICA Mirror

REFLECTING THE CONCERNS OF THE COMMUNITY APRIL 13-19, 2006

National Poetry Month Starts At Beyond Baroque With Three April Fools

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In his inaugural address last year, Mayor Villaraigosa laid out his vision of Los Angeles as the "Cultural Capital of the World." The next day, at Councilman Bill Rosendahl's inaugural, chosen to be held outside in Venice Beach near the Poets' Wall "to be among the people," the mayor added one crucial sentence: "Venice is the metaphor for all Los Angeles."

Poetry is the art of highest intensity, and its home, since 1968, is Beyond Baroque Literary/Arts Center, in Venice. In a recent calendar, Fred Dewey, director of Beyond Baroque, and editor of Beyond Baroque Books, described why poetry is more essential than ever in these distressing times: "Poetry is a return, a beginning to remind us that we are not beasts, robbed of language and law."

Poetry, again, returns.

This year's National Poetry Month began at Beyond Baroque on April 1st with "Three Fools for April." The reading featured Viggo Mortensen, Henry Mortensen and Scott Wannberg, two veteran poets on the Los Angeles scene (one with a few other credits as well), and newcomer Henry. The evening, like so many at the Center, represented the passing of the torch of poetic inspiration – first lit in Venice by its Beats, passed on through the 70's generation, through Punk and so much more, to the present. On April Fool's Day, the torch was passed from Viggo, an alumnus of the center's Wednesday Night Poetry Workshop and a board member for the last decade, to Henry, son of Viggo and L.A. rock musician and poet Exene Cervenka, Beyond Baroque's very first librarian. Scott Wannberg served as voluble godfather in what Paul Bowles called "The Baptism of Solitude" – that supremely satisfying sensation of existing in the midst of something that is absolute.

Mortensen began the evening by lighting a candle and quoting a phrase by poet S.A. Griffin. "We are here for the sweet stigmata of the poem. And here's the news." The breathless, packed room received the news, and it was clear from the moment Viggo spoke that this was poetry's night.

With thousands wanting to fit into a space that holds only 120, the event certainly could have been held in a much larger venue. What took place could not have happened anywhere else. What all sensed immediately upon entering the doors was that intimate, real experience



Three Fools for April: poets Scott Wannberg, Henry Mortensen and Viggo Mortensen.
Exclusive photo by Margery Epstein.

for which Beyond Baroque is well known. The three poets asked to read there; anyone attending could understand why. Anticipations, expectations, hopes, dreams – all were heightened by the close spirit of language, rising to the rafters.

The reading, round robin style, was familial, friendly, ebullient, father and son ribbing each other, Wannberg energizing the audience with his own oracular excursions – happy to appear with his old friend Viggo as they had years back at the famed Iguana Café. Viggo was soft-spoken and welcoming, 18-year-old Henry mature-beyond-his-years, ending one of his readings with the ancient Chinese Taoist Chuang-Tsu's wish "to meet a man with no words."

The poets coached each other on, grabbing from among sheaths of paper, reading each other's poems, even stopping for a moment to read from Exene's own work. "Mom's on tour, and was sorry she couldn't be here," said Henry, launching into another poem from his recently completed chapbook (a small book).

Publication is a central part of everything the Center does, and encouraging Henry to do a chapbook was part of the lead-up to the event. Director Dewey noted Henry had already read in the Sunday open readings. Tonight, Viggo provided back-up for his feature debut.

At the end of the night, Viggo spoke of Beyond Baroque as "a place to come to read, try to listen, go home – go home, wanting to write." The staff with Lola Terrell, and including Pablo Capra, Art Lust and an army of volunteers, brought this to life, adding a video projection in the lobby for a high tech touch.

The world outside was never far from the poets' minds Wannberg: "The war gets younger all the time. Nobody should look that young. Nobody." "There is no time now. There is no time anywhere." Henry Mortensen: "They are all laughing. They do not know they will not be laughing soon," and, reading lines by his mother, "I wait to know what time it isn't."

This home for the soul in Los Angeles has something no other major city in America has – a landmark building identified with poetry, embodying its life, week after week, month after month, year after year – and known for this across the country. It is a place where one can, in Viggo Mortensen's words, "dream of children with their heads still on." The walls, the bookstore, the archive weave together and hold the thousands of voices, old and new, that have read there, like a master's fine violin. People may come for any number of reasons, but they leave, carrying the possibility of transformation.

This April Fool's day was summed up by a couple lines, one from Wannberg – "Give the world a sun that will dance" – and, finally, by Viggo: "Dawn comes quietly. Uncomplicated."

