

SOUTHBANK CENTRE

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Images [HERE](#)

Poetry International Festival 2026 celebrates the ‘people’s poet’ Benjamin Zephaniah as part of the Southbank Centre’s 75th anniversary celebrations

Highlights include:

A key moment in the Southbank Centre’s 75th anniversary programme, the festival includes a celebration of **Benjamin Zephaniah** in the Royal Festival Hall, a national poetry project **Imagine the Future** engaging 2,500 school children plus an on-site installation, and **A Poet in Every Port**, the National Poetry Library’s nationwide project, arrives in London.



L-R: Benjamin Zephaniah © Benjamin Zephaniah Estate; Jackie Kay © Shaw and Shaw; Michael Rosen © Billie Charity; Lemn Sissay © Hamish Brown

The Southbank Centre’s longest-running festival **Poetry International Festival** returns (Friday 10 – Sunday 12 July) and includes a celebration of the life and work of the trailblazing poet **Benjamin Zephaniah**, as well as a celebration of **Allen Ginsberg** at 100.

The festival programme brings together multi-art events, workshops and on-site activity as a key part of the Southbank Centre's 75th anniversary celebrations as the centre marks its creation during the 1951 Festival of Britain.

Mark Ball, Artistic Director of the Southbank Centre, says: *"In our 75th anniversary year this latest edition of Poetry International Festival reminds us of poetry's power to hold a multitude of artistic and social influences, as we look to legendary voices such as Benjamin Zephaniah and Allen Ginsberg whose poetry was infused with music and social activism. At the Southbank Centre we aim to ignite a love for poetry and creativity not just on our site, but across the UK too, and we're delighted that the work of our brilliant National Poetry Library will engage more than 3,500 school children around the UK with our A Poet in Every Port and the Imagine the Future projects".*

A Celebration of Benjamin Zephaniah

At the heart of this year's festivities, the programme celebrates the powerful life and legacy of the 'people's poet' **Benjamin Zephaniah** (Friday 10 July, Royal Festival Hall). A trailblazing force in British culture, Zephaniah's radical spirit remains at the heart of our cultural life, and an ever-present reminder that poetry belongs to everyone. Hosted by BAFTA-nominated poet and broadcaster **Lemn Sissay** and **Pauline Black**, Zephaniah's immense contribution to poetry and beyond will be celebrated with an evening of music, readings and recollections from **Jackie Kay**, the former Scots Makar and award-winning author; and **Michael Rosen**, the former Children's Laureate alongside many others.

Jackie Kay, poet and playwright, says: *"It's a pleasure to be a part of the Benjamin Zephaniah celebration as part of the Southbank Centre's Poetry International Festival. Benjamin Zephaniah was a force of nature and an agent of change in the world of poetry. His work will always resonate and continue to impact people's lives. His is a spirit that will never die."*

Qian Zephaniah, the poet's wife, adds: *"Benjamin's influence was immense, but it was his deeply genuine connection with people that truly set him apart. Seeing his legacy honoured here, among the voices he inspired, feels profoundly significant. His spirit is carried not just in his words, but in every heart he touched."*

Imagine the Future

Renowned poet **Lemn Sissay** leads **Imagine the Future**, an ongoing national project spanning Birmingham, Manchester and London for over 2,300 schoolchildren, who are invited to share hopes and dreams for the future through poetry and creative writing. For Poetry International, Lambeth schoolchildren will see their words displayed in a site-wide installation, launching on Friday 10 July. Imagine the Future invites schoolchildren in Years 5, 6 and 7 to create their own visual poems, drawing inspiration from the history of the Southbank Centre, the 1951 Festival of Britain and beyond.

Lemn Sissay said: *"The Southbank Centre is Lambeth, and Lambeth is the Southbank Centre. The Southbank Centre is the nation and the nation is the Southbank Centre. I couldn't be more excited to join these young poets on this journey during the Imagine the*

Future project. When children put pen to paper to envision tomorrow, they discover the power of their own voices. As this iconic centre celebrates 75 years of inspiring creativity, these students will write the verses that might just shape the world."

A Poet in Every Port

Poetry International Festival coincides with the London stop of the Southbank Centre's nationwide project, **A Poet in Every Port** (Sunday 12 July), which sees the National Poetry Library go on tour across the UK, from North Uist in the Outer Hebrides, to Penzance in Cornwall; Bangor in Northern Ireland to Caernarfon in Wales. Joined by the project's ambassador, beloved poet **Roger McGough**, the mobile National Poetry Library will visit the Southbank Centre for a day of activity; from free public events, workshops to poetry readings. For more information on this project, see the press release [here](#).

Additional highlights include a celebration of the 20th Century icon **Allen Ginsberg** (Sunday 12 July) featuring musical, visual and vocal reinterpretations of his works. There will also be events with poets **Raymond Antrobus, Ilya Kaminsky, Kim Hyseoon, Paul Muldoon, Denise Riley**, as well as a host of free events throughout the weekend.

For more information about the Southbank Centre's 75th anniversary celebrations, visit **our 75th Anniversary** page [here](#).

#ENDS#

EVENT LISTINGS

Benjamin Zephaniah Celebration

Fri 10 Jul, 8pm, Royal Festival Hall.

An evening of poetry, music and memories to celebrate the life and legacy of the 'people's poet', Benjamin Zephaniah. A revolutionary force in British culture, Zephaniah took poetry to the streets, infusing it with reggae rhythms and the urgency of social activism. This celebration is hosted by Lemn Sissay, the BAFTA-nominated poet and broadcaster. He is joined by a line-up of Zephaniah's artistic admirers and collaborators who reflect on his enduring influence through readings and personal tributes.

After Catastrophe: Futures Beyond Crisis

Sat 11 Jul, 12.30pm, Level 5 Function Room, Green Side, Royal Festival Hall.

When the world seems turned on its head, it's often only then that the voices of young writers are heard. But what would it look like to work towards more ethical, sustained literary futures? Poets, translators and editors explore why we rely on young writers during a crisis and how translation might be just the tool we need for a different future.

Masterclass: Raymond Antrobus

Sat 11 Jul, 10am, Foyle Pavilion, Level 3, Green Side.

Multiple award-winning poet Raymond Antrobus shares his wisdom to help you take your own poetry to new heights. Antrobus describes himself as a 'poet, educator, writer and investigator of missing sound.' He's published multiple books of poetry, two children's books

and his first long form prose work *The Quiet Ear* is a story of the British-Jamaican poet's upbringing and coming to terms with his deafness.

Masterclass: Ilya Kaminsky

Sat 11 Jul, 1pm, Sunley Pavilion, Level 3, Blue Side.

Elevate your own poetry and writing skills with the help of the prize-winning poet Ilya Kaminsky. Named as a BBC 'artist who changed the world in 2019', Kaminsky leads this session designed to help you discover new ways of writing and to grow your own poetic practices. Ilya Kaminsky is the author of *Deaf Republic* and *Dancing in Odessa* and a winner of the *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize.

Peter Gizzi and Denise Riley

Sat 11 Jul, 2pm, Purcell Room.

What happens if trauma isn't something that consumes us but is instead transformed into lyric poetry? Be swept away by the power of vulnerability with live readings and conversation from Peter Gizzi and Denise Riley, world-leading poets in the art of the elegy. Gizzi reads from his TS Eliot Prize-winning collection *Fierce Elegy*, an astounding collection of poems in response to the loss of friends and family, while transforming that pain into light. Riley won the 2012 Forward Prize for Best Single Poem with 'A Part Song', a profoundly moving poem documenting the loss and grief following the death of a son.

Raymond Antrobus and Ilya Kaminsky

Sat 11 Jul, 5.30pm, Purcell Room.

Two explosive poetic voices come together to dive into how poetry can speak to, witness and challenge the world around us. Kaminsky is the author of *Deaf Republic*, winner of the Los Angeles Times Book Prize and was selected as one of the BBC's '12 artists who changed the world'. He was born in Odesa, Ukraine in 1977 and arrived in the United States in 1993, when his family was granted asylum by the American government. Antrobus is an award-winning poet and author whose work explores sound, identity and belonging. He is the winner of the Rathbone Folio Prize, Ted Hughes Award and the Sunday Times Young Writer of the Year Award.

Masterclass: Peter Gizzi

Sun 12 Jul, 10am, Sunley Pavilion, Level 3, Green Side, Royal Festival Hall.

One of America's best-known poets, Peter Gizzi, shares insights on the art of poetic writing and navigating the question of 'who is speaking' in poetry. The masterclass centres on a compelling question: 'who is speaking?' Explore the relationship between world and word, and learn to ask who is speaking in a poem. Do we speak or are we spoken?

Masterclass: Denise Riley

Sun 12 Jul, 1pm, Foyle Pavilion, Level 3, Blue Side, Royal Festival Hall.

The winner of the 2012 Forward Prize for Best Poem and author of *Say Something Back*, which was shortlisted for the Forward Prize for Best Collection, offers up her insightful expertise to help you discover new ways of writing. This workshop invites you to take a step back from what can often seem to be a complicated artform and to embrace the theme of 'simplicity'.

Kim Hyseon and Paul Muldoon

Sun 12 Jul, 5.30pm, Purcell Room.

Get set for poetry that dismantles the everyday, making way for the surreal and unforgettable. Explore reality from unconventional angles as two titans of the imagination, Kim Hyesoon and Paul Muldoon, present their work with live readings.

Allen Ginsberg at 100

Sun 12 Jul, 7.30pm, Queen Elizabeth Hall.

Rejoice in the life and work of the American bard and 20th-century icon, Allen Ginsberg, with an eclectic mix of guests spanning generations and disciplines. With performances from some of the biggest names in music and poetry, and musical, visual, and vocal reinterpretations, *Allen Ginsberg at 100* is an event bursting at the seams with creativity and imagination. Curated and produced by Jesse Goodman in collaboration with the Allen Ginsberg Estate and the Southbank Centre.

NOTES TO EDITORS

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Lemn Sissay, who is also part of A Celebration of Benjamin Zephaniah added

“Benjamin and I came up at different times - boys from the system who found our voices in poetry and never shut up. To stand on stage at the Southbank Centre, - a kind of home - and celebrate him feels like holding a conversation across an impossible distance. He is our conscience in verse. We won't mourn him—we raise the roof with his riddims and let his thunder roll on”.

Press images [HERE](#)

About the Southbank Centre

The Southbank Centre is the UK's largest multi-arts centre and engages the most diverse audiences of any performing arts organisation in the UK. Our biggest venue, the Royal Festival Hall (2,700 seats) is the lasting legacy of the 1951 Festival of Britain and the ambition and values of that project – that arts, ideas, innovation and culture can heal communities and should be available and accessible to everyone – are still our guiding principles today. The Southbank Centre is uniquely able to offer a wide-ranging, inclusive and world-class artistic programme spanning contemporary visual arts, music, dance, performance, literature, comedy and spoken word across the Royal Festival Hall, Queen Elizabeth Hall, Purcell Room, the Hayward Gallery and our free spaces. We are also home to the National Poetry Library, the National Academy for Social Prescribing (NASP), two resident organisations (Kinetika Bloco and Tomorrow's Warriors) and six resident orchestras (Aurora Orchestra, Chineke! Orchestra, London Philharmonic Orchestra, London Sinfonietta, Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment and Philharmonia Orchestra).

www.southbankcentre.co.uk

About Imagine The Future

Part of the Southbank Centre's 75th Anniversary celebrations, Imagine the Future is a major national education project led by renowned poet Lemn Sissay. Engaging over 2,300 schoolchildren (Years 5–7) across London, Birmingham, and Manchester, the project invites

students to explore their hopes for tomorrow through the creation of visual poetry. Supported by a cohort of professional poet-educators and continuing professional development (CPD) for teachers delivered in partnership with the Centre for Literacy in Primary Education (CLPE), the initiative culminates during Poetry International on 10 July 2026. Students' collaborative poems will be transformed into a large-scale public art installation at the Southbank Centre and published in a commemorative newspaper anthology, ensuring the voices of the next generation are central to the anniversary year.

www.southbankcentre.co.uk/create-learn/schools/imagine-the-future/

About the Southbank Centre's National Poetry Library

The Southbank Centre's National Poetry Library is the largest public collection of modern poetry in the world and is housed at the Southbank Centre in London. Founded by the Arts Council in 1953 and opened by poets T.S. Eliot and Herbert Read, the library contains over 200,000 items spanning from 1912 to the present day, extensive resources for poets, academics, schools and families. Hosting exhibitions and events, as well as offering an extensive catalogue and ebook service accessible online, the library is free to use

www.nationalpoetrylibrary.org.uk

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