The Black Cabaret

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Abstract
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Inside there were no lights. A long-haired usher, wearing a glittering pendant across his bare chest, took Denise and myself by the hand, leading us by some sixth sense down what seemed like a long tunnel of black velvet cloth. Then I sensed that we were entering some more open space, and almost at once we were jostled and bumped by an unfriendly crowd. Still there was nothing visible. We stumbled up a metal ladder to some other place, crowded also, and then over the shins of a long row of people until, abruptly, we were commanded to sit in the two empty seats we found behind us. There had been nowhere to leave our coats, so we were still wearing them. I could sense people all around, above and below.
Directly in front a woman was getting instructions from her girlfriend in a loud tinny whisper on how to light a cigarette – no doubt bought especially for the occasion. Well, it was not strictly illegal. There were several noisy puffs, then a sharp fit of coughing. But she was hardly the only one. The air was thick, almost viscous with smoke. Had things really been like this?

Suddenly there was a ring of light in front. On the stage, picked out by a single dim spotlight stood the Master of Ceremonies, visible only by his white make-up and the silver bow-tie and spangles on his dark suit.

‘Welcome, ladies and gentlemen’, he intoned without a trace of welcome, ‘to our evening of Nostalgia. But be warned! This is no self-indulgent Victoriana or Roaring Twenties evening. Tonight we bring you your Origins: your parents’ and grandparents’ days.’ He gave a snide little twirl of his cane. The action drew a meaningless snigger from the couple in front. ‘...The grand panorama of the Age of Waste! Without which we wouldn’t be here...’, he paused for exactly the right fraction of a second, ‘three deep’. There was a sort of uneasy response, a low sound as though people were shifting in their seats and sniggering inwardly. He had yet to earn his first real laugh. But he continued with unction: ‘And now, to start your evening’s entertainment, to get us all off on the right foot, I’m proud to give you, yes it’s the sensational success story of sensual show-biz, the one and lonely... Silky Stevenson!’

There was a burst of foot-stamping, loud whistles, female pubescent screams, all expertly counterfeited by the modern audience. Abruptly a second spotlight picked out ‘Silky’’s lean mop-headed figure slouching blindly across the stage. He was almost into the wings on the other side when the MC intercepted him with an exquisitely-timed sortie and led him by the arm to a chair in the centre of the stage. ‘Yes folks’, he repeated with a conspiratorial giggle, ‘it’s our one and only Silky!’

There was a sort of satisfied stir from the audience. This was what they had come to see. For like the Victorian age, in fact like
every earlier period in history, the Age of Waste had been reduced in the eyes of its descendants to a series of more or less amusing clichés.

Left alone, Silky cradled the guitar in his arms like a pet kitten, then strummed a few wildly inaccurate chords. More screams and applause. 'Like to sing for you', he intoned nasally, 'a li'l song called *If I was a carpenter.* . .' There were more screams; and of course he chose that moment to decide his guitar needed re-tuning, re-stringing almost. The audience fell about laughing.

I began to relax. It was all tasteless enough, but hardly anything that need interest the Department. And *laissez faire* had always been my policy. . . . Something was nudging me persistently and painfully in the ribs. 'Denise!', I thought, rubbing my right side ruefully. There was no mistaking, even in the dark, the sharpest pair of elbows on the habitable globe. 'What is it, lover?' I whispered.

'They've got the period wrong', she hissed. 'That song is late '50s. But their manner's all over the place. Right now he's acting mid-'60s, or '70s even'.

'For Heaven's sake, Denise, what does it matter? Perhaps the song went through a few revivals, eh?'

I was being unkind. But it had always seemed unfair to me that someone who knew as little as Denise should be so nigglingly precise about the little she did know.

By now the performer had begun, his notes trembling with lyric falsity:

> If I were a carpenter
> And you were a lady. . .

He milked those lines of all they were worth, letting his voice slide away at the end in an affectation of helpless modesty, as if he had abandoned emotion in favor of powerful restraint; only to pour it all back into the following two:

> Would you marry me anyway?
> Would you have my baby?
That last banality was greeted with cheers from one part of the audience, but with hoots of dangerous derision from the other. Only to my immediate right was there a patch of brooding silence. I had the guilty suspicion that she was crying. God knows there is little enough that your average eight-billionth of the human race can achieve: I might at least have allowed her her small area of expertise. But it was too late; and though I wanted to console her, the words wouldn’t come.

I was puzzled by the audience. Their response to the second stanza of Silky’s song was mixed, as before. It was not especially loud, but it continued for much longer than I would have expected. As if to distract them, Silky was suddenly surrounded by a number of 3-D figures; and I as a professional was forced to applaud, for someone had cleverly taken a couple of old American ’60s films and transposed them into modern holograph effects. On one side of the stage a smuck comedian was propounding stuff about ‘With six you get egg-roll’; on the other the 10 year-old hero of some family-comedy series was whining ‘But Mom...’ as he proposed some crazy kids-will-be-kids and gosh-cute-as-darn-all scheme.

And then right above the performer, poised in the air as if by magic came the 3-D equivalent of the Black Cabaret’s standard publicity poster: a shot taken from a late ’60s car-ad for the good life, showing the smiling blonde-permed consumer-wife in the console seat of her block-long gas-guzzler, surrounded by kids and groceries. The Age of Waste in a single picture! There was a slight burst of applause as the final line materialized underneath, with even its letters 3-D’d: CHILDREN HALF PRICE. A nice touch of Waste-iana!

Silky was continuing to belt out the words against his long-dead holograph competitors, but I could sense that the audience were hardly listening. The man on my left moved restlessly. I heard a long angry intake of breath, and then out it came again as a sound I found hard to classify, something between a sigh and a muted scream of rage. He repeated the unpleasant procedure. All around I could sense the pressure of anger building up, until like the
steam valve on an old-fashioned pressure-cooker it erupted in a burst of hissing. But mingled with it was a sort of hysterical giggling, as if this, after all, was what part of the audience had come for: a purging of unhealthy emotions, a reversed Oedipal flowing of black blood. I had the image of a generation ceremonially gathered to curse its parents; and felt I understood something of why this show had roused such antagonism. Was it because the Black Cabaret was the reverse of all other theatrical spectacles; not a celebration but a condemnation of life? A condemnation perhaps even of the one thing that is sacred in theatre: the human kinship that bonds audiences together.

As the noise died down the holographs disappeared, and Silky began the next verse:

If I were a gypsy
And you were a lady...

The lumpy suet of the American dream mingled crassly with the fake old-English greenwood trappings; yet the music was extraordinarily hypnotic. Silky had a kind of genius, I decided, for this sort of thing. He could use his music and his tremulous voice to break down your judgement, draw you into the warm communal mush-world of the song. A lesser performer would have been content with this achievement. But Silky then re-activated your judgement after compromising your emotions. Just when he had the whole audience reverberating with him, ready even to sing along, he would abandon his mask of rapture, look straight out at them (directly, as it seemed, at me), drop his lower jaw extravagantly open and begin vacuously miming the words in a clear gesture of contempt. It was like a slap in the face. And then again he would resume his mask, and draw you back into the dream. It was risky as hell. He was making the audience love and hate at once, soliciting and then spurning their emotions. Even on me the effect was like having one lobe of my brain played off against the other, and I felt the rage rising inside. But then Denise’s elbow was digging me again steadily in the ribs. ‘Darling can’t we leave?
This is giving me a headache. And it's all so *predictable*.

I knew better. This show was playing on the audience's emotions in a way that made it impossible to predict what resolution, if any, it could have. It surprised me that Denise could pretend otherwise - or was I the odd man out? As an emergency measure I grasped her elbow firmly, and above the roar of a new wave of hissing yelled, 'Wait'. 'What?' she yelled back, but I made no reply.

On stage Silky had been forced to pause, and the MC had taken over. 'C'n I ask you, friends', he was yelling into an old-fashioned cord-attached microphone, 'to refrain from throwing our new plastic ash-trays at the *artistes*'. He said 'plastic' as if it had been 'platinum' or 'diamond'. '...And if you find the temptation creeping up on you' - an exemplary ash-tray came skimming out of the dark, grazing a thin furrow across his white-painted cheek - 'if you're finding it hard to resist, we do ask you to bethink yourselves, very sincerely, no, not of our feelings, no, I say not of our feelings' - he was riding the audience's emotions as adroitly as a storm-petrel skims a wave - 'but of, yes, of...yes, of course you guessed it...of the *starving Indians*!'

There was a howl of resentment at this famous cliché. A barrage of ash-trays, some of them none too empty, fell all around him. One or two connected, but he seemed unmoved. It was as if he too were deliberately taunting the audience, mocking them, focusing upon himself their own self-hatred, reminding them constantly of the difference between the world they had and the one they might have known.

A stir on my left warned me that my unseen neighbour had found an ash-tray and was flexing his arm. I leant away as far as possible, but the next minute his elbow clouted me fair on the temple. Despite the pain I struck back, driving my own left elbow into his soft stomach. There was a grunt and a minute's pause. Then he moved, and I was just in time to deflect a formidable blow to the face. There followed a full two minutes of cursing and struggling as we each tried to get in one clear punch at the other,
impeded by darkness and the press all round. He got in first. It caught me full on the face, and I fell back across Denise, who only then realised what was going on. I must have passed out for a few minutes, because the next thing I can remember is sitting upright again, dabbing blood from my nose and blurrily watching the show.

The MC seemed to be finishing a routine on the old 20th century fallacy about ‘two children not increasing the population’. ‘Doesn’t it double the family right off?’ asked his straight man. ‘Not at all’, blustered the MC, puffing out his chest, ‘after all, the parents are going to die some day’. ‘And what if that isn’t for fifty years?’ pleaded the straight man. ‘All the better’, said the MC with a conplacent twirl of his cane, ‘they’ll be around to see the grandchildren’. And with that the band struck up a great Whump! of triumph, like a two-fisted bang on the piano.

You could smell a sort of sullen disgust rising from the audience. They were thinking of all the missed chances, the vested interests, the prophets – no, rather the simple voices of common sense – that had been stoned or slandered. There were groans of rage or despair from several points. And then it happened.

‘Traison des clercs! More traion des clercs!’ cried a loud voice in the audience, and the whole throng took it up, that ancient legal phrase, seemingly relegated to the history books, that had returned to become the catch-cry of modern prosecutions. The word more, repeated over and over, had the sound of the sea. The noise went on for several minutes. This was the sort of thing I had been led to expect, but I still didn’t know how it would finish. The strange thing was that I could sense a sort of happiness seeping into the crowd. At last they were united in something. All they lacked now was an immediate object for their hate. I think that if the First Citizen himself had been there I would only have had to seed off the cry of ‘Lynch him!’ and he would have been lost. I found myself hoping that none of them knew my name; for I suspected I knew now to what sort of resolution the evening was building.
When he could be heard at last, the MC gave proceedings a new twist. 'I smell something wrong in the air, my friends', he said unctuously. 'Can someone open a window, please, and let in some fresh, clean air?' This was a black joke. Here in the heart of the city it was an offence to admit air to buildings except via a scrubber system. Then, as the laughter died, 'Alright! Who farted? Come on, own up and admit it'. He paused a moment. There was silence while the consequences of confession, or denunciation, sank in. 'Well don't hide it! Which of you so kindly opened their bowels for us? You?' The straight man emphatically denied it. 'Alright, let's find that farter and get rid of him'. 'Yes, lynch the farter', sang out a hysterical section of the crowd; and 'Lynch him, lynch him', went up the cry through the premises. Though it was too dark for anyone to observe me, I felt the need to join in. Found my lips actually saying the words. For a crowd is like a cut worm: the one thing that it and its members want is to be joined up in the whole.

But then the MC waved for silence. The noise decreased, and disappeared. He took a step forward. There was no trace of his former humorous or sarcastic bearing. 'My friends', he said solemnly, 'what we have to do now is find that person. Look around you everyone, please, look around'.

There was a stir of fear. Should I denounce the enemy to my left before he denounced me. The second of indecision seemed to last an age. Suddenly there was a loud voice from the darkness: 'What do you mean we have to find him? This place is all one black fart. And there's the farter – HIM on stage'.

The whole thing must have been loosely scripted, for the MC played his cue superbly. A second's embarrassed silence, a slight shifty look, an unconfident gesture, and suddenly the crowd had picked up the scent of fear, as a stallion sniffs a mare. 'That's the farter. Get him!', sang out a dozen voices at once.

'No. Please my friends. I apologise...'. The MC's shift to terror was abject. 'Get him, get him, the overpopulating sod', yelled one of the women in front of me, joyously finding full voice, 'pull his stupid head off!' Denise plucked me firmly by the arm; the roar of
the crowd was so great that she had to shout into my ear: 'I'm going to be sick. Darling help me out of here'. This time I agreed at once, glad of the excuse to leave. Now while the crowd was distracted might be the last chance. But then several things happened at once.

As we began elbowing our way in what Denise believed was the direction of the exit, I glimpsed the proceedings boil over. About a dozen shadowy figures poured onto the stage, men and women together. The quailing MC waited with hands outstretched in a gesture half of prohibition half of supplication, until they were perhaps two metres from him; then turned and bolted. In a flash there were three or four dozen after him.

They were checked by a startling 3-D illusion of a police cordon flung between them and him. It lasted perhaps ten seconds; and the quarry was gone. The lights disappeared as the whole place rocked to a roar of 'Get him!' It was a cross between the Black Hole of Calcutta and the inside of a blacked-out hornets' nest. Without warning Denise and I were picked up in a human surge that was pulling us towards the stage. It stopped, and a minute later drove us the other way, moving further in a few seconds than we had managed with all our efforts before. In the dark I lost track of which way we were facing. There seemed to be a cross-current or eddy that was forcing us apart. I hung on to Denise's wrist, but more and more bodies forced themselves between, until I had to let go or break a finger. Abruptly I was brought up against a wall. It seemed unfair to be pushed so inhumanly hard when there was absolutely nowhere to go. And all the time the cries of 'Get him!' and 'What do we want? More! More! More!' went on. Somewhere near me a man was screaming, babbling over and over that his arm was broken. My previous concussion returned as nausea and a sense of unreality, and I felt myself blacking out.

Suddenly I was blinded. We all were. There was a long minute before anyone could comprehend that what had seemed a blinding flash was simply all the Cabaret's lights being turned on at
once. At the same time came the most ear-shattering sound I have ever heard, a single enormous BONG, as if we were hanging just below the clapper of a bell the size of Mount Everest.

When it died away I found myself standing with hands over ears and my eyes just squintingly open. There was no sound except broken sobbing from three or four directions. I found myself desperately wanting something simple and normal to happen. 'We thank you, ladies and gentlemen', a giant voice intoned in a 20th century accent, 'for assisting in this evening's performance. We trust you will forgive us for not taking you fully into our confidence as to its conclusion, which in fact is a little different every night. Please do not spoil the uncertainty for those to whom you may be so kind as to recommend our entertainment. We ask you to leave peaceably, and remember that the police are waiting outside. You can begin exiting now.

When the press relaxed enough for me to get hand to my overcoat pocket I pulled out my cloth street-cap and jammed it down over my forehead. With luck I might pass unnoticed. The crowd was uncannily quiet. We were together, but broken, drained. Then at last it became possible to move. There was still no sound. Slowly, with only occasional sobs, we drew back into ourselves; and then each of us separately turned towards the exit and began the long shuffle to the world outside.