

Watch with Mother

‘He looks like Tarzan!’ my mother shouted.

She had to yell to be heard over the full orchestra at the London Coliseum busy playing Berlioz’s introduction to the famous ballet *Le Spectre de la Rose*. Tarzan of course was none other than the world’s most famed ballet dancer Rudolf Nureyev dancing the part of the rose, and he had just swung into view from the right of the stage holding tightly to a creeper. Mother and father were sitting at the other end of the stalls from my wife and I and I could see her also waving to attract my attention, but despite our close proximity to the dancers I couldn’t see if Rudolf, like me, was grinning at my mother’s remark. Certainly the sighs of indignation from the other two thousand plus people in the audience indicated that they were less than impressed, but so what, Mum never cared what others thought as far as our own entertainment was concerned, especially after she had spoken to a pint or two of Dom Perignon. Incidentally, the ballet that evening was being performed by the appropriately named ‘Nancy Ballet Company’, and world renowned Prima Ballerina Margo Fontaine was already on stage pretending to be asleep and dreaming, and probably not expecting to be awoken from her slumber with the announcement,

‘Oooh, he nearly hit Jane!’

Another fairly regular performance which was perhaps just as ‘Nancy’ occurred every time we went with Mum to her favourite restaurant across the road from her apartment in Brighton. The Regency restaurant in Regency Square is famous for its fish and is ideally situated opposite what was once West Pier (where they filmed the wonderful World War One satire *Oh! What a Lovely War*). Unfortunately all that’s now left of the pier is a wreckage of iron work following years of neglect, storms, a highly suspicious fire although nothing to do with either my brother or myself, and the singular inability of the West Pier Trust to decide what to do with it, which ended up with them losing agreed Lottery funding for a restoration project. Fortunately despite years of

having to cope with regular visits from my family the Regency Restaurant is not in ruins and is still going strong. Even the most well-behaved of evenings spent there would end up with us all wearing silly hats and bonnets, singing at the tops of our voices, generally annoying our fellow diners by being far too loud and invasive and trying to get them to join in especially if they were foreigners, and being the last to leave after many many bottles of wine and glasses of tongue blackening Strega. My brother Paul looked especially fearsome in a chef's hat and holding a cleaver, pretending to have stormed from the kitchen and picking on anyone who had dared to leave anything uneaten on their plate. But what especially used to upset and disturb diners on nearby tables once the lights had been dimmed and the candles brought out were our late evening séances. The group on our table would steer our loud conversation round to mysticism and the occult, and pretend we were going to summon someone from the 'other side'. We would talk about the afterlife and suchlike and look upwards as if someone was watching over us, all thus guaranteeing interest from anyone sitting within earshot. Then once we had hooked our audience (quite appropriate for a fish restaurant) we would hold hands around our table, all would go deathly quiet, I would start breathing deeply and heavily and then pretend to go into a trance. All the other diners would stare at us transfixed and in nervous anticipation as we focused our eyes down at the table top and sat motionless for what would have seemed ages. Then, as I slowly raised my head whilst looking upwards to try and show just the whites of my eyes, in a deep baritone voice I would say the immortal words:

'Is there anybody there?'

And at that cue, Paul and I would lift the table with our knees and make it seem to zoom around as we and everyone else in the restaurant screamed.

The Melrose restaurant next door to the Regency had it even worse. The Melrose was and is a family run restaurant and so they were happy that we went there as a family as well. I would have my young daughter Alexandra with me and as most parents will know, keeping young children amused when you want to have a nice relaxed but lengthy evening meal is difficult at the best of times. Colouring books soon become coloured in, puzzles soon become too complex or boring, and it's hard for a child to concentrate on reading a book when the adults are becoming increasingly boisterous as the wine takes effect. It was at this stage of the evening that Paul and I

would be at our most creative. I think the most inventive of our ideas and one that kept Alexandra amused until it was time for us to exit pretty sharpish (and not go back to the Melrose for some considerable time) involved nylon fishing line and Blue Tack, both purchased from the extremely handy and late opening news and gift shop next door. There were quite a few other diners on the evening in question and with the owners and sole elderly waitress popping in and out of the kitchen at the back of the restaurant, there were numerous occasions when we were left unsupervised. Every time this happened my daughter would make a little more progress on a slow circuit around the room from table to table, and at each stop looping the fishing line round one of the many wall mounted pictures depicting local scenes from a bygone age, fixing the line in place with either Blue Tack or when this ran out a self-made paste of mushy peas, and then draping it across to the next picture ready for tying and sticking when she was next unobserved. After about an hour of this surreptitious adventure we had one end of the line tied to the leg of someone else's table, the rest of the line threaded neatly and invisibly around the entire restaurant encompassing some twenty pictures of varied dimension, two nice vases, some glassware and some ornamental brass frying pans, and the loose end ready for tying to the front door which was to become the 'trigger' when we were ready to leave.

In the end, as we still had loads of wine left to drink, and as we were all too impatient to see what would happen, my brother tied the line to the front door incorporating a coat stand to act as a kind of pulley and we waited expectantly for the next unsuspecting person to either leave the restaurant or enter from the street outside. As an aged couple duly made their exit, I can still remember seeing through a drunken haze and tears of hysterical laughter all twenty pictures swinging maniacally to and fro as if possessed, hearing the vases and glasses smash as they seemingly leapt from their perches of their own free will, and the symbol-like crash of the frying pans as they jumped noisily to the floor. It was like the kitchen scene from Disney's Fantasia where all the utensils come alive and everything goes wrong for Mickey, and somewhere at the back of this hullabaloo were the shrieks of Mrs Melrose, the terrified waitress and the other shocked diners. But looking back on this event, what mystifies me most is the fact there were plenty of other people in the restaurant throughout the evening, so what on Earth they thought my daughter was doing as she made her way stealthily

round the room, creeping under their tables and then pretending to take an avid interest in each picture by turn, I will never know. I might just miss those times....