

The Years of the Bear

By Richard Eason

Back in the '90s, The Brown Bear was of a very different character, and so, probably, was I. It had a history which preceded me by decades and, thanks to its proximity to The Crucible and The Lyceum, had long been established as Sheffield's theatre pub. A traditional two room boozier, its walls were covered in a palimpsest of flyers and posters for theatrical events going back through the years. Biggins in drag or Lionel Blair's manic grin faded and peeled over a dozen Hamlets. I first went there aged nineteen and swore never to go back, feeling affronted that my student ID had been declined. It took a change of management, six years, and a rainy walk from a new temp job for me to return. And to stay. For two years I denied The Brown Bear my company for scarcely an evening. Less frequently a group of friends and I would call in around noon on a Saturday for the vast and punishing Moose breakfast. Moose was the name of the Brown Bear chef, rather than any exotic elkish ingredient, but the traditional British breakfast was nonetheless huge and guaranteed to induce deep lethargy. Moose was a talented chef with a taste for the experimental and whose imagination was stifled by the traditional confinement of the Bear. Turning out stews and pies by the tonne (all excellent), he compensated for his constraints with vast portions. Eventually he left Sheffield, and I like to think that somewhere, delighted punters are being destroyed by steak puddings presented with a touch of Blumenthal.

A typical after work visit to The Brown Bear would find me arriving at the bar around five thirty and ordering a pint. Beer lovers today may be confronted, depending on where they find themselves, by selections of ale that vary greatly in region, country, strength, and style. Between the darkly roasted booze grenades of Imperial Russia to the throat tightening quadruple-hopped American pales, nestles shyly something approximating a pint of best. Decision making in The Bear was simple by comparison. There was a lager; Guinness (all stout was Guinness); a cider; and two

bitters. One was John Smith's Magnet and the other was something else. I drank Magnet, always. It was a reliable deep copper bitter with a hint of brown sugar. I would take two pints, a few roll-ups, and an hour's day dream, while the working day faded out and my own life faded back in.

Hell was never raised, and yet, I recall my quiet beery reverie offended one regular. Brian, I think it was, who accosted me one day. Shouting in my face, he advised:

“You don't do anything. You just sit there. You never talk to anyone. You're always on you're own. Why don't you talk to anyone?”

I looked at him blankly and said I was just minding my own business and a little later he apologised, allowing me to return to my trance while the Old Holborn clouds seeped gently into my suit jacket. Brian had a pronounced stammer and when, on one occasion, he decided to regale a couple of builders with his day's trials, one of them laughed pointedly in his face until he gave up and went away. I felt this to be harsh but, all the same, if anyone there was going to draw me from my solipsism, it wouldn't be Brian.

I did become acquainted, though never friends, with a number of Brown Bear regulars. There was a retired policeman called Geoff who was drip feeding his pension over the bar, and who reminded me a little of Peter Cook. He occasionally effected an accent which had a touch of E L Wisty about it. Often I would find him playing cribbage. He could rarely combine the roles of card player, heavy drinker, and raconteur to any competent degree, and would suffer the irritation and abuse of his fellow players as he miss-counted, moved the wrong matchsticks, or otherwise forgot he was participating altogether. Geoff was invariably the butt of everyone's jokes yet I found him to be the wittiest and most good natured of the Brown Bear clan. If I laughed when he slurred, “Bought an organ the other day, I'm going to learn how to play it,” I meant it fondly. Geoff would at times enter an antagonistic phase depending on the volume he had consumed, which would see his wit grow barbed, and lesser intellects humiliated. One particularly morose security guard who

2 The Years of the Bear

would, like several other workers (myself included) while his time in the Brown Bear's stale comfort, was prone to announcing his plan to commit suicide. It was generally felt that the plan lacked conviction, having been mooted without supporting action for over a year. Whilst others dismissed him, Geoff, in impish mood once said, "Good idea, why don't you then? Go on, piss off and kill yourself."

The man asserted feebly that he would, but thankfully didn't. He looked devastated though, and Geoff had made an edgy gamble that had run dry on humour. This, I thought, is where harsh banter, crosses into nihilism. I suspected that if the unhappy security guard were to have been absent from his bar stool the next night, no-one would have cared.

Believe me, there was a lot of fun, and a lot of happiness, in amongst the characters of The Brown Bear. When I settled at my table with my fresh pint of Magnet and pack of Old Holborn after a day inputting invoices, I was right where I wanted to be. But there was one thing I learned about getting into conversation with pub eccentrics on extended sessions, and that is to quit while I was ahead. That in itself isn't a difficult concept to grasp, but the art lies in seeing the corner up ahead, the one that leads from friendly chatter into a dark world of surreal delusions and bizarre opinions. One evening, there was, as there often was, a chair free at my table. The tall man with the white back-combed hair and elegantly twirled moustache asked very politely if he might join me and I welcomed him. With hindsight, this may have been my critical error. Our pleasant and eloquent conversation covered the rights of the individual to pursue pleasure without being judged, the harmful social effects of pornography, and a variety of other topics befitting a respectable dinner table.

I have never been able to place what fork in the conversation provided this gentleman with the opportunity to expound his extreme right wing views and declare himself a Nazi sympathiser.

I managed to make my excuses shortly after he declared, loudly, with moist eyes, and fist

clenched, "My grandfather played the piano for Eva Braun."

As I hastened to the bus stop I imagined him goose stepping, Basil Fawlty style, around the tap room.

The Brown Bear was a stage for the damaged, the confused, and occasionally the psychopathic, but it's nearby theatre connection, meant it was also a place to unwind for famous actors, who could enjoy a drink there without being gawped at, as they might in some of the city centre pubs. Whilst itd was not prohibited to talk to actors, there was a general acknowledgement that they should be allowed to enjoy their drinks in peace. Of the many who called in I remember seeing Frazer Hines, Brian Glover, and Una Stubbs. Miss Stubbs was a tiny woman and I would like to report that she was inebriated, violent, and obnoxious, but that, sadly, would be a lie.

The choice of after show bar for actors and theatre goers alike is no longer The Brown Bear. A modern sophisticated bar has taken its mantle, and from the infrequent return visits I've made to the pub in recent years, I don't find it hard to see why. The manager, the chef, and the original cast of regulars are gone. So to is the crazy wallpaper of posters. The walls are unadorned. The place is sterile but the people are ugly. It sounds snobbish but I refute that. Back in the 90s there was a lowly exoticism to our Brown Bear gang, which is missing from this new lot. They're cheap without cheer. There is a general dental deficit. And the banter now is neither cruel nor funny, it's a strident four letter tennis.

The last time I was there I walked out without buying a drink. And come to think of it, I doubt my character has changed. It's definitely The Bear's. What ever dangers I relaxed into when I was twenty-five, I reckon it was worth it for the payback in life lived. The post ban flatulence and methadone graduate trances of the modern Bear don't invite risk. I will stay safe and sane, and see you in The Sheaf View.