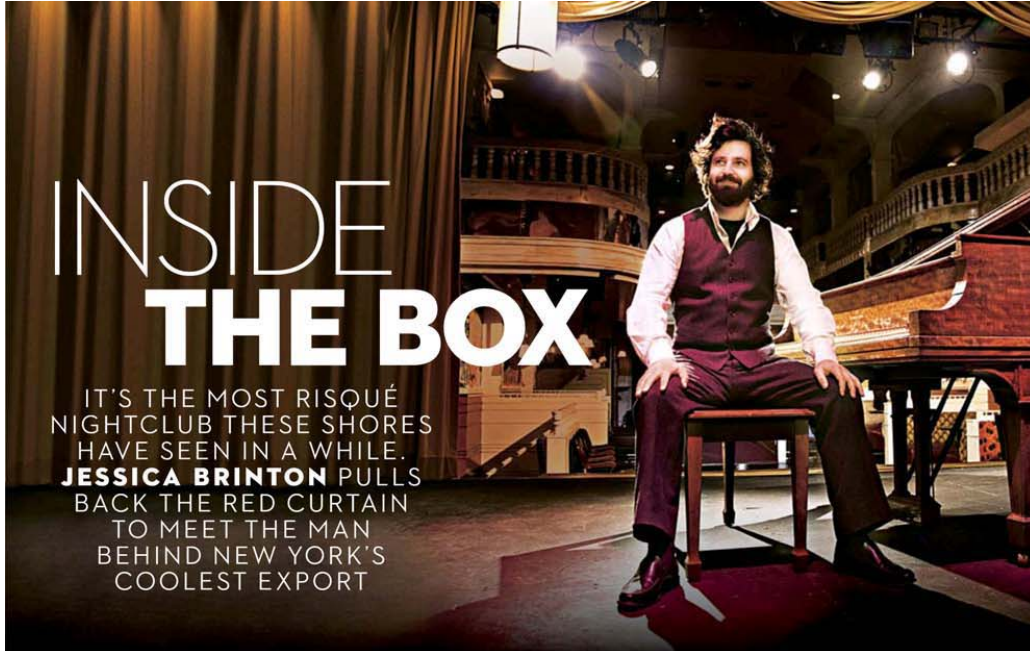




THE SUNDAY TIMES

February 27, 2011



INSIDE THE BOX

IT'S THE MOST RISQUÉ NIGHTCLUB THESE SHORES HAVE SEEN IN A WHILE. **JESSICA BRINTON** PULLS BACK THE RED CURTAIN TO MEET THE MAN BEHIND NEW YORK'S COOLEST EXPORT

It's Friday night and things are steaming up at the hottest burlesque club in London. Fragrant ballerinas in basques and high heels skip nimbly from table to table, jammed with raucous gilded youth. One boisterous group includes the brother of the future king of England. Harry Windsor sits with his friends knocking back the drinks, just like everyone else in the room.

Welcome to the Box, the latest New York import that everyone is talking about. Part old-style cabaret, part freak show, the club's surreal, grotesque and titillating performances — and the equally eye-popping bar bills — have got everyone from royalty and sloanes to East End faces clamouring to get in.

Tonight the crowd has already seen a gorgeous acrobat do somersaults in the air, and a puppet master do balancing tricks with his melancholic human puppet. At times, the acts are darker and more risqué. There are willy games. There is a man in a pig mask doing something unmentionable with an anal plug. At 5.50am, the main show ends and a selection of guests is invited to the private VIP area for an even naughtier version of the show.

Excitement was building long before the Box opened. The first party held there was for Dinos Chapman's birthday, attended by Kate Moss. Then, during London Fashion Week, Moss and Tilda Swinton hosted a party there to celebrate 10 years of the hip fashion bible *Another* magazine.

In the intervening weeks, almost anyone who is anyone has dropped by, each leaving with their own take on what they have seen. Some are repulsed, others get it in just the way the founder, Simon Hammerstein, wants it to be got.

Hammerstein is a 51-year-old New Yorker, and grandson of the late lyricist Oscar Hammerstein. He's a Bedales-educated, ex-club kid who spent his teens organising raves and his twenties putting on plays on the New York fringe.

He opened his first Box in a former sign factory on Manhattan's Lower East Side. Stories from the NYC Box are legion: Lindsay Lohan playing on the stripper's pole; a woman who gives birth to dolls; a

double act called Twincest. There has been speculation that the Box NYC has begun to lose its edge, however, and some critics suggest Hammerstein has pushed his acts too far in his quest to keep the customers rolling in. Others disagree. There have even been allegations of seedy happenings at the club.

The venue for his London outpost could not be more perfect. The original Raymond Revue Bar, sited at the nexus of the West End's theatre and nightclub districts, was opened in 1958 as "the world centre of erotic entertainment". Do not on any account, however, suggest that the Box is a strip club. Hammerstein takes it very personally if you imply he's selling sex. He is a theatre director asking us the question, what do we find acceptable, what we don't — and why.

"I get really upset hearing you use the words 'porn' and 'sex' about my show," he says. "Are there sexual elements in our show? Absolutely. But that's not the foundation of the piece, that's just how they tell a story. It's more musical theatre meets performance art meets vaudeville."

Will the Brits think so? Hammerstein, after all, was educated here, and says he has been pleased by the reaction so far. He likes our "transgressive humour", but reckons we think too much. "If people intellectualise it, they miss the point. Instead of saying, 'I don't like that, I find it disgusting,' they say, 'Well, I don't think it's right.' You can't look at it from a moral standpoint, because for the performers, it's their act. It's meant to titillate and freak you out and make you laugh. It's a nonjudgmental space. As long as you're a free spirit, you're welcome here."

A free spirit with a lot of disposable cash. It costs an eye-watering £1,000 a table, plus, depending on who you ask, £50 to £60 a head for entertainment. Who is going to come? "People who want to celebrate a special night and have a good time," Hammerstein says. "I want people to get dressed up and make a big night of it."

I think they will. The Box is the first stay-up-late bar worth staying up for in a long time. It feels secret and naughty, and there's been nothing like it in the West End for years. ●



Don't look now Both Kate and Harry have visited Simon Hammerstein's Box, top

MICHAEL DUNN, PAUL GIFFE