



TALK OF THE TOWN

Openings, closings, people and places

SOHEMIAN RHAPSODY

The joy of drinking, the perils of esoterica

The expression "Sohemian" turns out to be a contraction of "Soho Bohemian". Here in the upstairs studio of the Soho Theatre, Dean Street there are about 90 of them packed into the half-dozen rows of folding chairs or perched on ancillary ledges. Their number includes journalists and students, pale androgynous boys with gravity-defying hair, an ex-Buzzcock and one or two gnarled old gentlemen who look as if they were waiting in the bar of the Wheatsheaf to greet Augustus John when he first arrived there in the early years of the last century.

The Sohemians have assembled to commemorate one of the greatest Soho Bohemians of them all: the legendary Julian Maclaren-Ross, who died 40 years ago this month after a quarter-century's bar-propping in the vicinity – the friend of Dylan Thomas, Tambimuttu, Cyril Connolly and all the other time-honoured denizens of the wartime Fitzrovia jungle, and the original of X Trapnel in Anthony Powell's *A Dance to The Music of Time*. There are even descendants present, in the shape of Alex Maclaren-Ross, together with his teenage son, the former looking far too juvenile to be the child of a man who hob-nobbed with Nina Hamnett.

Compered by the subject's biographer, Paul Willetts, the evening kicks off with the screening of a BBC interview first shown a few weeks before his death. Hulking cigar brought intermittently to his lips, trademark dark glasses prohibiting eye contact, Maclaren-Ross turns out to be surprisingly la-di-dah in tone. Describing his time in the "armeh" he reprises an interview with a colonel bidden to assess his suitability for officer training. Did he speak French? Why, yes he did. Not much use, French, now that France had fallen, the colonel gamely deposed. The conversation turned to the spy novelist E Phillips Oppenheim, whom Maclaren-Ross had met in the South of France. What had he talked about, the colonel wondered. "Mostly he talked about agents, sir," Maclaren-Ross volunteered. "Bound to, of course, a chap like that. A wonder he isn't head of MI5." "No, sir, literary agents..."

Subsequently, Jonathan Meades reads from Maclaren-Ross's autobiography *The Weeping and the Laughter* (1953) and recalls the late Jeffrey Bernard's dictum (the irony



Barfly: the Soho writer Julian Maclaren-Ross, whose just desserts may be at hand

HULTON ARCHIVE

of which presumably escaped him) that Maclaren-Ross was "a drunk". Virginia Ironside, who proposes that she may have met her idol in the course of teenage forays to the Colony Room, whose proprietor Muriel Belcher greeted each incomer with an Anglo-Saxon obscenity, reads an early short story on the experience of peddling vacuum cleaners on the pre-war south coast, a try-out for his best novel, *Of Love and Hunger* (1947). Yours truly examines the Powell portrait, the embodiment of Powell's conception of "the personal myth", flattened by fate when his departing mistress, Pamela Widmerpool, throws the solitary copy of his unpublished masterpiece *Profiles in Spring* into the Regent's Park canal.

"He is too esoteric" a fellow dinner guest once complained about the highly stylised monologue merchant on the other side of the table. Indeed Maclaren-Ross was far too esoteric to find life easy or achieve the kind of fame he assumed was his due.

Now, curiously enough, just desserts are at hand: reissues of his classic *Memoirs of the Forties* (1965), together with other autobiographical writings, and a volume of selected stories are published next week. Four decades on, in the heart of his old stamping-ground, Maclaren-Ross's day seems finally to have come.

DJ Taylor

Further information: www.sohemians.com

THE COLLECTOR

Celebrity art tours

And so to the Mall Galleries, down by the old ICA, where self-described "ageing BBC presenter with a face-lift" Anne Robinson is opening the annual Discerning Eye exhibition. She is one of six people – two artists, two critics, two collectors: Ms Robinson gets in as a "collector" – who have been invited to

select pictures from the 2,000 submitted by scores of mainly young artists (it's a selling exhibition). Over the last 15 or so years the selectors have included some distinguished names: Marina Vaizey, A S Byatt, Sir Roy Strong;



but then again, Quentin Willson, Richard Littlejohn, Lionel Blair.

After her speech, Anne takes me round her personal selection, refusing to drink anything in case she loses her lipstick and anybody wants to take a photo. She came to art late in life, she says. She defers in such things to her husband, Penrose, who would have gone to art-school if his father hadn't drunk with the editor of the *Islington Gazette*: he was packed off to learn journalism instead. In the last decade or so, though, she has begun to collect pictures: her latest, and favourite, →