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Memories are made of this: an evening with the middle classes

With *The Leisure Review* intent on leaving no stone unturned in its exploration of the leisure habits of middle England Mick Owen was sent to Derbyshire's premier stately home to see how the Barbour and Burberry set spend their summer Saturday evenings.

That Chatsworth House has been around long enough to have incarcerated Mary Queen of Scots will come as no surprise to anyone who approaches it through its surrounding parkland from the main Chesterfield to Manchester road. It seems enfolded in the gently rolling Derbyshire pastureland and to grow organically from its surroundings. If ostentation, excess and generations of unearned privilege can be beautiful, Chatsworth is indeed a beautiful place.

On an intermittently sunny evening with a cricket match leather-on-willowing downriver the aesthetic appeal of the house and its gardens is obvious. With sheep being herded towards the wooded slopes and tired hikers contentedly resting outside the estate church a sense of established serenity is endemic and even the streams of vehicles merging politely into an accommodating car park can do little to diminish the bucolic tranquillity. It is a perfect setting for a picnic supper on a rolling lawn which, given that the expedition in hand is to view something styling itself the Rat Pack Vegas Spectacular in the company of some good friends and a hamper, is more than serendipity.

Who pays £15 a head to sit on their own chairs, provide their own provender and listen to people pretending to be Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin and Sammy Davis Jnr outdoors in England? From a study of the queues snaking away from the ornate gates of the Duke of Devonshire's 105-acre back garden, around 3,000 Daily Mail and Daily Telegraph readers. Burberry, Barbour and Aquascutum are the predominate clothing ranges and where food is not packed in wicker the branded carriers are from M&S and Selfridges. People like this would not know what a co-operative was, let alone buy their humus and French bread from one; the air of self-satisfaction cloys. Even the self-consciously evening-dressed few fail to carry off their outfits with the ironic chutzpah they, we hope, intended. Such is the tenor of the event that the pomposity of the audience is never pricked and rather than opening its gates to a new, more urban audience, were that indeed Chatsworth's intention, the estate has simply provided yet another opportunity for their core market to congregate.

Chatsworth, and we suspect a copyright application cannot be far away, has embraced the need to turn a buck with aplomb. Alongside the farm shop and the schools' visits, the coach parties and the conferences, there is a fully fledged events programme which has seen the Wind in the Willows and Bjorn Again grace their stage this summer, as well as the Vegas "spectacular" in question.

The appeal of the tribute act will escape anyone not versed in popular television nor a regular attendee of their local public house. Such was the success of Matthew Kelly's Stars in Their Eyes that pubs and clubs now number far more than simple Elvis Presley impersonators on their bill, with half the fun being working out the act's name. Bjorn Again, should you not know, is an Abba tribute band whose name riffs on the name of one of the original band's members. Other bad puns are available.

Rather than try to come up with a clever name for their act, the people responsible for the all-singing, some-dancing ensemble who impersonate the Rat Pack of legend simply state what is in their tin. Except we are not in Las Vegas and these are not the men who caroused and crooned their way to notoriety in the 1960s. They don't look like them, they don't have their charisma and worse, given that for the majority of the audience spread across the hillside as evenly as only the middle class can spread themselves they are no bigger than small toys, they don't sound like them.

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At least they don't sound like them when they sing. When they talk it is hard to hear what they sound like, even when for a brief period everything bounces back from the walls of the house giving everyone two chances – or no chance whatsoever – to hear what is being said. To be fair, the sound people resolve their challenges sufficiently at one point for the Sinatra-alike to be heard as he retails a long-winded jest. Unfortunately it is at this point that the impersonator unwittingly slides away from his Sinatra and begins to sound more like the chap who occasionally delivers the Ask Elvis vignette in the Steve Wright Show on Radio 2. Ask Elvis is very funny; ersatz Frank is not.

Only a fool would have expected three perfect copies and only a complete idiot would let the quality of the show spoil their enjoyment of a surreal and enchanting evening. The honeyed stone of Chatsworth House catching the lowering sun's rays form a delightfully incongruous backdrop to the unobtrusive stage; beyond the foothills of the Pennines interlock, green on lush green. A beautiful setting, the strains of Gentle on My Mind played with verve and no little precision by a small band and a bottle of something pink and fizzy shared with friends are the ingredients of a good night out no matter how cold it gets when the sun drops behind the horizon or how long the queue for the facilities is in the interval. It would be churlish to deny the appeal of this sub-Glyndebourne outing.

Walking away from the arena, however, having thoroughly enjoyed the evening, it was salutary to discover that while Chatsworth had been swinging Tottenham had been burning. As moneyed, middle-aged, predominantly white fat cats enjoyed a privileged performance which at one point featured the quip, "We've found our level: the racists are all over this side", poor, young, predominantly black men were making violent their protest that this is a nation split by more than just geography. Ain't that a kick in the head?

Mick Owen is managing editor of *The Leisure Review*.

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