

# Whale of a time but no Marilyn...

**M**arilyn Monroe. There's a name you just don't hear any more – a starlet of

yesteryear who briefly shimmered, and now has fallen into the abyss of oblivion.

A forgotten name that resonates with no one today.

I cannot recall the last time I saw anything about her in print, and it's even difficult to track down a picture of her these days.

Yes, I must be the last person standing to remember and adore dear and fabulous Marilyn.

So imagine my excitement when, logging on to the Proud Cabaret website, I saw images of a convincing lookalike, miming to *Diamonds Are A Girl's Best Friend*.

Right, I thought, that alone will be worth the price of admission.

So I phoned the number, and was passed from one polite woman to a second, and then a third.

My booking was taken, with a £20 deposit, not unreasonable, for in Proud Cabaret we have that wonderfully old-fashioned (and very welcome) notion of dinner in a red and softly lit place, with a floorshow to skewer your interest – so the management doesn't want no-shows.

I was asked to pre-order three courses for myself and my guest, which I thought was really going it, so I gracefully declined.

There's a lot of Proud in Stables Market, Chalk Farm. A pride of Prouds: an art gallery, a restaurant, bar and – in addition to the cabaret – a throbbing and late-night club, for when Camden lets its hair

down (when, is Camden's hair ever tightly in a bun?).

The charming, louche and cobbled Stables Market is so called because here is where horses were sequestered in the old days, and the cabaret is held in the building where they were sent when they were poorly – the Horse Hospital.

It's a pitch roofed intimate space hung with scarlet fabric made cosy by red spotlights. Behind the black leather banquettes are crystal sconces with red silk shades. You either like all this or you don't. I did.

And you definitely want a booth here, and not a table on the central floor. Unless, of course, you wish to be the butt of the saucy female compere's every joke, not to say the handy repository for airily discarded feathered boas, sequin underpinnings and the odd caress.

## Suspenders

I was escorted to my table by an elegant and beautifully spoken young lady dressed in house style of a corselet that laced up the back and black knickers and tights which still contrived to sport a set of dangling suspenders.

Well right-oh, then.

My guest for the evening was Adrian Bridge, a travel writer for the *Daily Telegraph*. And although of course I am aware that the food here is really not the point, nonetheless the menu is clever in its brevity (five choices for each course) and also for cleaving to the stuff that people know they like to eat.

So I order Parma ham with watermelon and a celeriac roulade – which was just three little curls of ham, any subtlety obliterated by balsamic, nice crunchy triangles of



■ Proud Cabaret at The Horse Hospital, in Chalk Farm Road

melon and not so much a celeriac roulade as an interleaving of industrial coleslaw.

Adrian did better with his four pan-fried scallops – good and juicy – with a white onion puree, peas and pancetta.

As we ate our starters a warm-up bloke with a guitar sang and played. Have you heard of James Blunt? Have you heard of Ed Sheeran? Well, I am here to tell you that he was even more awful – hard to believe, I know, but there you have it.

High-pitched whining and irrelevant strumming. Then he would asthmatically cough into the microphone like Rolf Harris so annoyingly does.

This produced a sound somewhere between a locomotive in trouble and one of the poor old nags with the staggers that they used to cart into this very building.

The manageress – charming, attentive – came over to see that everything was all right. Everyone was so terribly caring – really needing to please you. No, they didn't know I was a reviewer.

For his main, Adrian wanted rack of lamb, rare. She explained that this couldn't be done (and it was, to be fair, an odd request) I suspect because everything here is previously par-cooked so that the service can dovetail with the performances.

She said she would serve it medium, and if he didn't like it, replace it with his second choice of sea bass. Such an offer in any restaurant, believe me, is singular beyond words. I had three tender slices of beef fillet with very good chips. The Bearnaise? Well I've had much worse, but it was sharp with too much white wine vinegar. Adrian's lamb came, was deemed too well done and within minutes he was enjoying a succulent tranche of sea bass (with dumplings, weirdly) and we shared decent peas, beans and spinach.

But look! A spotlight is on our compere. A lady in a short red sequined dress and outsized spectacles called Mrs Delicious. "Welcome to Proud Cabaret," she calls to us. "I am here to fluff you up!" And so the show began.

It was really rather terrific. An ash blonde in a very soignée gown, as designed by Erte and those wonderful long gloves, was sinuous on the little stage, and peeled away layers in the way they used to – teasingly and with style.

She was succeeded by a terrific torch singer called Bambi. Then there was a bit of an interval, and I looked about.

Here's a funny thing, of the 45 people there, 36 were female.

Later, the manageress told me that the Saturday before, out of an audience of 83, 79 were women.

I don't comment, I simply report. Then there was an act where a bloke ate fire. His mouth was ablaze as he sucked at it – Lordy, Lordy!

And then he flattened a wire coat hanger and, oh God, swallowed it.

At the sight of that it was all I could do to get down my very good Neal's Dairy cheese. And then the fellow was juggling five very pointy daggers. Grief. Throughout the acts, women were going to the lavatory – none of them moved during either interval.

Then another glamorous girl removed most of her clothes (tasseled pasties are big here – well, quite small, actually).

The music was pulsating, and the few male waiters wore mascara and Boy George ringlets and whooped a lot.

Then Bambi was back for a final song and rather surprised everyone, I think, by chucking her clothes off while she did it – you never got that with Streisand, did you? Or our own dear Mary Hopkin.

We had a whale of a time. The booze is sensibly priced, everyone is friendly and there is no hint of sleaze. The cost of dinner and the show was £49, though I think there are offers available. My only sadness? Marilyn wasn't there.

Poor, sweet Marilyn – totally forgotten, just as I said.

■ All previous restaurant reviews may be viewed on the website [www.josephconnolly.co.uk](http://www.josephconnolly.co.uk). Joseph Connolly's new novel, *England's Lane*, is published by Quercus as a hardback and an ebook.

## FACTFILE

### ■ Proud Cabaret

The Horse Hospital, Stables Market, Chalk Farm Road, NW1  
Tel: 020 7482 3867.

■ Open: Thurs-Sat only, seated by 8pm, show starts 8.30pm.

■ Food: ★★★★★☆☆

■ Service: ★★★★★☆☆

■ The Feeling: ★★★★★☆☆

■ Cost: Three-course dinner for two with wine (including show) about £150: good value.



HAZARA

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We have carefully brought together a selection of indigenous dishes from all the culinary regions of India, so whether you prefer the pungent aromas of the Northwest Frontier, the luscious blends of Awad, the cuisine befitting the Maharajas of Rajasthan or the sweet and spicy flavours of Goa we are sure you'll find your taste.