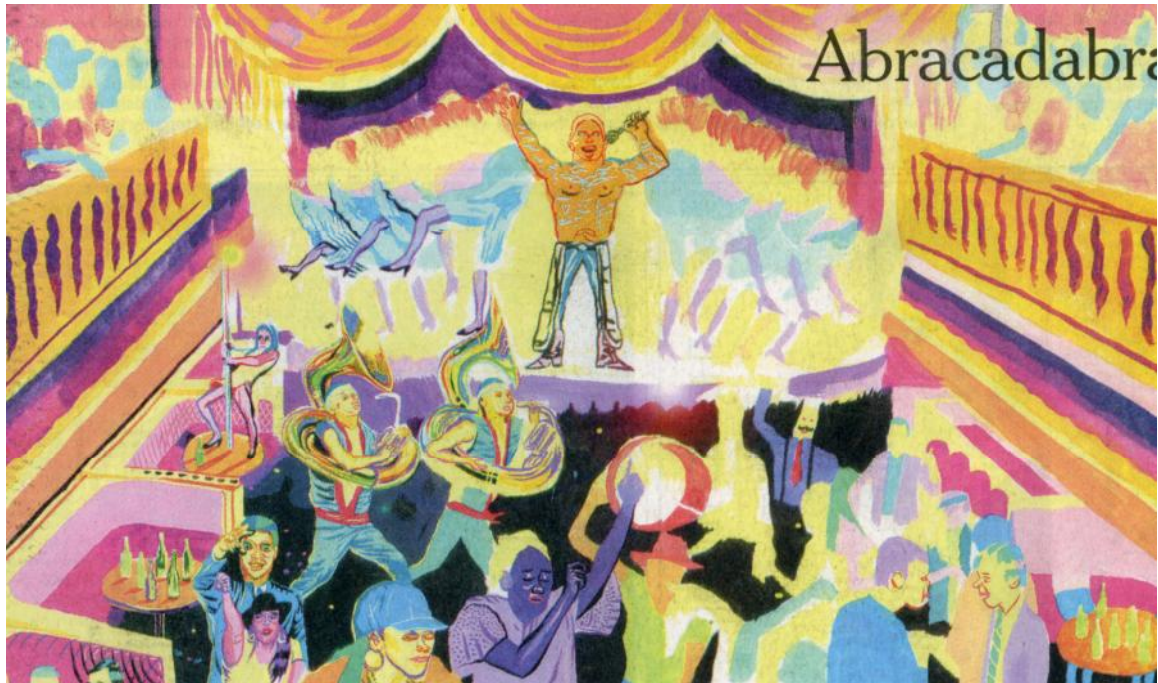


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BOÎTE; Abracadabra: Lifting the Lid Off the Box

By LOLA OGUNNAIKE



CONVERSATION and dancing at the Box, a new club in dinner-theater drag on the Lower East Side, slowed to a standstill as the Hammerstein Beauties, a troupe of dancers in feathered Bazooka-pink headdresses and matching beaded two-pieces sauntered their way through the room and onto the tiny stage.

"Her legs are unreal," a man dressed in a vintage T-shirt and worn sneakers declared, staring at a statuesque sandy blonde. Soon, another girl with more dangerous curves caught his eye. "Oh my God," he said.

It appeared that Raven O, the club's androgynous master of ceremonies, had anything but the Lord on his mind that evening. "Please drink. Do drugs. Do everything," he urged the crowd, clutching a rhinestone-studded microphone and smiling mischievously as the Beauties danced seductively around him. "Are you all feeling sexy?"

Moments later, a 12-person band in full marching regalia stormed the room, playing the lush horn-driven classics of the Nigerian folk artist Fela. The crowd erupted in applause. "Throw your hands in the air," Raven O yelled from the stage. "Get naked! Get nasty!"

Watching from the mezzanine, Mike Mills of the band R.E.M. did not get naked or nasty, but he was impressed. "You don't ever see anything like this unless you're in Vegas," he said. "That's what is cool about this place."

The Box opened its doors quietly in late December after keeping club-watchers waiting for months; the impresario behind it, Simon Hammerstein, has created a Moulin Rouge-infused playground for the kinds of people who are on a constant quest for the next exclusive hangout. With its elaborate theatrical performances and a Chrystie Street location for downtown credibility, the Box quickly became one of the city's most talked-about nightspots.

Charlotte Ronson, the designer and sister of the D.J.'s Mark and Samantha Ronson, staged a fashion show for her C. Ronson line there. Uma Thurman gave a birthday party at the club last month for her on-again off-again boyfriend André Balazs, the hotelier.

Sean Penn and Mike Myers have also been spotted there in recent weeks, as have the actors Jude Law and Josh Lucas, who, along with the actress Rachel Weisz, sit on the club's board. (Yes, board.) Lindsay Lohan appears to have turned the club into her New York pied-à-terre.

As the clock approached 4 a.m. on a recent Thursday, the actress, dressed in a white sequined minidress, was tucked away in a mezzanine corner, deftly twirling around and around and around a stripper pole. Two nights later, she joined Raven O on stage for a duet, wearing black sequined boy shorts, opaque tights and a matching T-shirt (very Sienna channeling Edie).

"She's here every night," a woman in tortoiseshell glasses and a fur hat groused. "Does she ever go home?"

Another regular, Andre Harrell, the music executive, said the space had the glamour of the perennial Paris club Les Bains Douches.

"I go there during the couture shows and the Box has that same international sexy," said Mr. Harrell, who has hit the spot at least twice a week for the past month. "It's musical, it's erotic, it starts late and goes late and it makes you feel like this is really the city that never sleeps."

Much of the night's frenetic energy is owed to Raven O, a nightlife veteran with platinum blond hair who performs in skin-tight leather pants and little else. Lips slathered in bright red lipstick, body covered in tattoos, his physique is as worthy of note as the club's elaborate theatrics (marionettes having sex, a troupe of samurai drummers, a transexual porn star, Buck Angel, displaying his wares) and shabby chic décor (red velvet and white lace curtains, decoupaged wallpaper featuring Babar and other less innocent scenes).

"His body is unbelievable," said Lisette Sand-Freeman, a public relations executive. She heard about the Box while on sabbatical in Australia. "Everyone kept calling me and e-mailing me about the Box, the Box, the Box, so as soon as I got home I had to go," she said.

Serge Becker, the nightlife guru who helped conceive the space, is fond of saying that he believes the Box is going to do for theater and nightlife what Area, the legendary '80s club he helped design, did for performance art and nightlife.

"A lot of people who have been around for five million years like me say it's like Susanne Bartsch's old party and Bentley's, and like the old Copa," said Mickey Boardman, a columnist for Paper magazine, who has seen many a scene come and go.

"It's such a soup-to-nuts mix of craziness," he added, referring to the club's socialites and drag queens, under-age celebrities and overripe boomers. "I think it's completely fabulous."

Such fabulousness doesn't come cheap. One long-time nightclub owner asked for anonymity before he began estimating that the Box must be spending anywhere from \$35,000 to \$50,000 a week to stage its productions. "That's why the table costs are so crazy," he said.

Tables on the ground floor start at \$600 (perk: that includes a bottle of Champagne). Tables on the mezzanine start at \$900 (perk: wraparound curtains that can shield the kind of illicit activity Raven encourages). Cocktails are pricey as well: a simple Bacardi and Coke is \$16.

Though the Box, a former sign factory, fashions itself as a place that will bring a new energy and an old vaudeville sensibility to the New York club scene, the old nightclub status quo appears to be still at work here. It's a safe bet that the models, celebrities and those with the right friends are not plunking down hundreds to party; that's for banker types.

Michael Musto, a columnist for the Village Voice, who attended a Fashion Week party at the space, joked about the club's exorbitant fees: "I've heard that you have to leave a credit card at the door and mortgage your house on the way out."

There is no cover charge, but according to the no-nonsense woman working the door on Thursday night, there is a list. "It's in my head," she said sternly, speaking to a person she was turning away.

"I'm friends with Serge," was a common refrain heard at the entrance. It didn't always work.

In addition to Mr. Hammerstein, grandson of the musical theater writer and producer Oscar Hammerstein II, the club's principal owners and creative directors include Richard Kimmell and Randy Weiner (of "Donkey Show" fame).

"We wanted to combine the social electricity of going out at night in New York City with the live arts," said Mr. Hammerstein, who holds weekly auditions for acts. "I wanted a mix room, not a 27th Street room where it was all bankers and models."

One of the minor partners, Cordell Lochin, said the shows are costing them "a pretty penny." But "if we make no money, pay off all of our investors and it's a place that everyone is talking about, then it will be worth it," he said, laughing.

Mr. Musto offered his own thoughts about the club's future. "I give it 18 months as a hot place, and then it will turn into something else, hopefully not a Starbucks."

But most patrons aren't close to over it. "They encourage a certain level of debauchery so people feel free to really let loose," said Nicola Vassell, the director of the Deitch Gallery in SoHo. Time flies by quickly, Ms. Vassell added. "You walk in at midnight and next thing you know you're like, 'No, it can't be 5 a.m.' "

The Box
189 Chrystie Street
(212) 982-9301

GETTING IN -- Try "I'm friends with Serge."

DRESS CODE -- For women: downtown chic (skinny pants and voluminous blouses) with uptown accents (quilted Chanel bags). For men: jeans and blazers.

SIGHTINGS -- Lindsay Lohan, Uma Thurman, Sean Penn, Samantha Ronson.

SIGNATURE EATS -- Veal macaroni and bags of popcorn, passed around after midnight.

Correction: April 1, 2007, Sunday An article last Sunday about the Box, a Moulin Rouge-infused club that opened on the Lower East Side last December, misstated the role of Cordell Lochin in the business. He is a full partner, not a minor partner. The article also misspelled the surname of another partner. He is Richard Kimmel, not Kimmell.