

RED LIGHTS OUT IN SOHO?

*Sexy, raucous, bustling, gay, grinding, forever entertaining—Soho has been the homeland of artists, writers, lovers and the badly behaved for more than fifty years. But as **Helen Croydon** reports, this could be the end of the sordid affair*

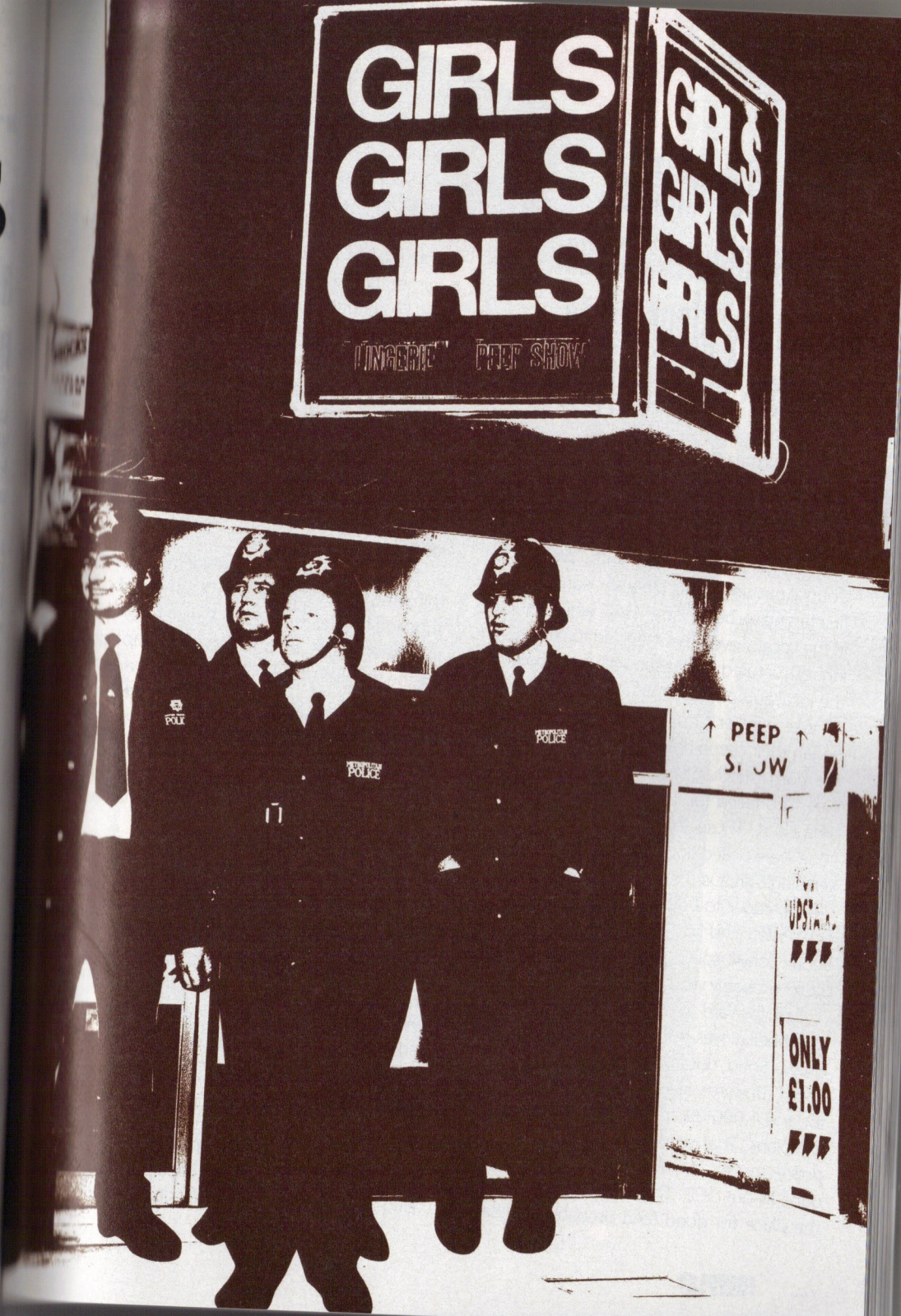
Christmas was the season to be merry. January—I hear—is the season to clean up our act. I am not sure I'm entirely with the idea that a cleanse is as good as break. I rather liked the December haze I found myself walking around in. I was quite enjoying the extra ration of double-strength skinny lattes that I was allowing myself on grounds of functional necessity. And I quite liked getting into all those compromising dalliances on a photocopier under the guise of 'we were mistletoed!'

But it seems fun police always strike in the end. If it isn't our kidneys they're trying to purge of excess it's the smut in one of the world's most reverable red light districts and vivacious gay villages—London's Soho.

The council is doing to Soho what our or-

ganic, hippy, lentil-pushing, Ayurvedic, life-coaching, naturopathic, treadmill-setters are doing to the start of our 2011—trying to clean it up.

In the 60s this historically rich Bohemian enclave of London was a dark 'n' dirty, run-down, fantastic hovel of sexual anarchy. Its brothels open to all and sundry from wealthy gentlemen in furs to the locals with a handful of change from last orders. Close your eyes, imagine steam rising from a small grimy window of a dimly lit five-storey crooked townhouse. Yes, very Charles Dickens. That was your 60s Soho. Packed with hardcore film clubs, filthy dancers and crumbling underground dens that never closed. The best bit was that Westminster Council was powerless to do a thing about it. Corruption in Scotland Yard's Obscene Publica-



yes—Soho. She doesn't buy the antisocial behaviour argument: 'The clientele of Soho are young, culture-loving adventurous Londoners—a real recipe of fun. It's a world away from the soul-less nightclubs of Leicester Square. I like the things that make Soho edgy and dangerous. There is a real sense of history there. We won't get that if we fill it with pasta restaurants and Angus Steak Houses.'

'I think there is a lot in Soho to be proud of, not ashamed of. It isn't even dangerous. I walk through it every day. People don't feel threatened. I like the stereotypical look of a woman's face peeping in the window behind fringe curtains flapping in the wind. Yes there is a darker underworld but it is only there if you go looking.'

Poignant timing in the death of seamy Soho comes the death of two of its biggest icons and steadfast fans—Sebastian Horsely and Paul Raymond.

Horsely, an artist and eccentric—most famous for voluntarily 'crucifying himself' in the Philippines, lived, breathed and fucked Soho. He claimed to have slept with over 1,000 prostitutes and to have worked as one himself at one time. He lived at 7 Meard Street with a sign on his front door that read, 'This Is Not A Brothel / There Are No Prostitutes At This Address'.

A week before his death, in June 2010, after an overdose of heroin and cocaine, he complained in an interview for *The Independent*: 'The air used to be clean and the sex used to be dirty. Now it is the other way around. Soho has lost its heart.' To another newspaper, who asked what he thought of the emerging health food shops among the dimly lit alleyways, he said: 'It's like having a brothel in a church.'

Paul Raymond, who died in 2008 at the age of 82 was less the artist and more the businessman. He formed a porn publishing empire and virtually bought the place. The man was dubbed the King of Soho. When police began to crack down on sex shops in the late 70s and shut several down, property prices plummeted. Raymond was quick to take advantage. He pounced upon freeholds of whole streets. It's said he owned 60 of the 87 acres of Soho, including much of the north side of Old Compton Street.

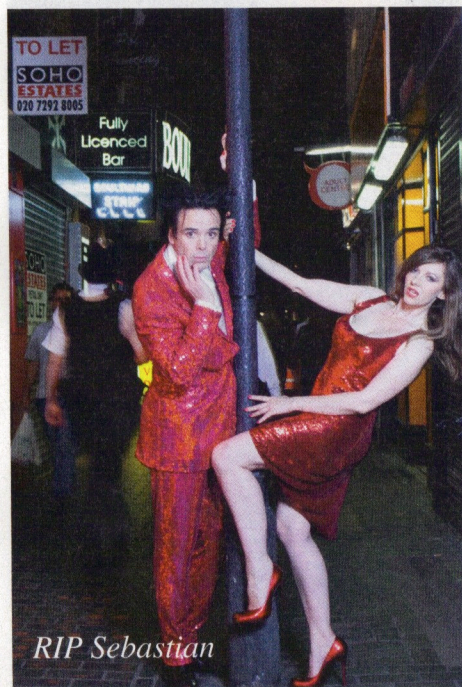


It was Raymond who started one of the most renowned entertainment joints of Soho—the Raymond Revuebar, which he opened in 1958—then the only premises in Britain to stage live striptease shows.

The way he got round the strictures of Lord Chamberlain's Office was to use a legal loophole and turn it into a members-only club. His clientele were well-heeled, the venue flash, the drinks expensive. Raymond cleverly convinced the stuffy high society that they'd enjoy a bit of rough. One of its shows featured a dolphin in a tank which could take off girls' bras.

The Raymond Revue's brightly lit sign declaring it to be the 'World Centre of Erotic Entertainment' made it a local landmark. And landmark it remained until this well-oiled bar, rich with tawdry tales, shut down for good in 2009.

The Revue Bar joins a sorry pile of the fallen



RIP Sebastian

mighty. The Marquee, which has hosted some of the most famous jazz and skiffle acts including the Rolling Stones in 1962 ended a near 50-year history when it closed in 2004. It has reopened in a different venue but with a cleaner-cut look and dropped its cool crowd.

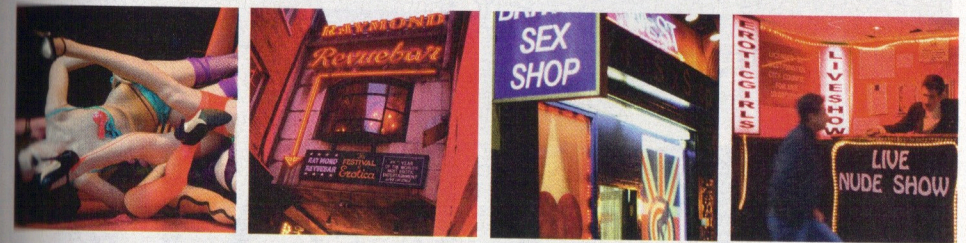
The soulful Soho Lounge also closed down in the last few years. In its place—Dean Street Townhouse—another plush-but-bland hotel and restaurant open only to those with healthy city-sized wallets. Shool Back to Mayfair with you!

Some of the old-world gems are still there—just. The Piano Bar and Madame JoJo's are still making Brewer Street buzz. Through the decades, Madame JoJo's has put on nightly shows featuring legends like Ruby Venezuela, Lily Savage, Adrella and Regina Fong. It's now become a forum for alternative cabaret but until managers can be sure the clean-up police are off their backs, it is hard to think how they can continue to develop more imaginative new shows.

The theatrical ruched drapes and chichi chandeliers of Café de Paris is still hosting risqué entertainers but a switch in its target audience to the mainstream, more well-behaved citizens means it's lost its louche texture.

And it isn't just the bars which are closing, it's the brothels and the strip bars too. The old 'clip joints'—which lure men through the door with the promise of sex before stinging them with extortionate drinks bills—are now unheard of. Tighter laws on prostitution, via the introduction of The Policing and Crime Bill last year, means police can intervene if more than one person is working on a premises where sex is for sale. This includes maids or receptionists. So girls can only work within the law if they work alone.

The English Collective of Prostitutes claims there are more closure orders on



Soho brothels than ever. 'It's outrageous,' says Cari Mitchell a spokesperson from the campaign group. 'Soho is nowhere near the Olympic stadium. The Council uses the Games as an excuse to attack Soho. It is one of the safest places for women to work because women are part of the community. If they put compulsory purchase orders or closure orders on flats, women will be dispersed into all sorts of unsafe areas—including the streets—where they can't be monitored. The authorities continue to use the trafficking myth as an excuse to close houses down. Every raid drives the industry further underground.'

Other laws are strengthening the Council's clean-up too—one being tighter regulation of porn. In December 2009, MPs re-enacted The Video Recordings Act. This was the result of someone discovering that the original 1984 version was unenforceable because the people who made it forgot to tell the European Commission about it. Talk about duh!

This 'new' law means that all films must have been graded by The British Board of Film Classification. In other words, a film showing anything more than what Catherine the Great probably did before breakfast is not going to get a little red triangle kite mark. And any shop trying to sell stuff without that little red triangle can be shut down.

In fact, Westminster Council proudly de-

clares that since April, it has seized 13,000 illegal DVDs and other items from the West End with a street value of £325,000. It is also vainglorious to inform us that in 1999 Soho had 61 illegal sex shops but now just 14. And six of those have closure orders.

That all sounds very noble until you find out what exactly an 'illegal sex shop' is. Basically, it's a shop or cinema that sells or shows films without a kite mark. Or a shop which sells an R18 video without a license.

There are a maximum of 18 of these licenses available from Westminster Council. We don't know how much these licenses cost because an increasingly snappy Westminster Council press officer's answer was: 'Look, I was on an early shift today and am already late in getting home!' But we know other London councils charge somewhere in the region of £16,000.

Not in his wildest imagination would Raymond have imagined that Soho would be restricted to a measly 18 premises where you can get a decent porn movie or that strip joints and cabaret would have to leap through bureaucratic hoops to stay in business. And never in his most lucid moments would Sebastian Horsely have imagined that the scores of brothels would live in fear of closing and the girls he loved so much would live in fear of being ousted onto the streets. What a sorry package at the end of the rainbow of history for Soho.