

The New Sheridan Club

Newsletter

XVI

WELCOME, DEAR FRIENDS, to another Newsletter. I have to inform the Membership that this Newsletter may be a little shorter than usual—a combination of a paper shortage due to the war and the usual Winter clash of the December/January editions makes this unavoidable. But fear not! There is still plenty of exciting news to be had and great times ahead.

The Next Meeting

The next Meeting of the New Sheridan Club will take place on Wednesday 6th February 8pm–11pm, upstairs at The Wheatsheaf, 25 Rathbone Place, London W1T 1JB.

The Turn this month will be Mrs H who will astound us with the racy tale of *Whistler, Leyland and the Peacock Room*.

FOR THE LATEST information on what the Club is up to and has done, have a gander at www.newsheridanclub.co.uk. For those of a more technological bent, you can also help spread the word by becoming a “friend” of the NSC in its “Myspace” incarnation at www.myspace.com/newsheridanclub. There is also a “Facebook” page but how you get there I have no idea.

We dare not vouch for those who link to our “Myspace” and “Facebook” pages but most of them seem to be good eggs.



ESSAYS OF NOTE AND WORTH

The Assassination of Georgi Markov

By Torquil Arbuthnot

(Extracted from Mr Arbuthnot's crime walk before the New Sheridan Christmas party.)

Georgi Markov was a successful literary figure in Bulgaria before he defected to the West in 1969. He even joined the Bulgarian Writer's Union, officially approved by the government. He was also accepted by, and socialized with, Communist Party leaders, eventually learning the intimate details of their carefully hidden, private lives.

But he went too far with a novel called *The Great Roof*. This novel depicted an incident in Bulgarian history when, in May 1959, a roof under construction at a giant Communist Party steel mill showpiece collapsed, killing and injuring an unknown number of workers. The Communist Party failed to inspire or lead workers in the search for victims. Markov called the novel “an allegory



The New Sheridan Club traditionally meets in the upstairs room of the Wheatsheaf pub just off Oxford Street. The Wheatsheaf is one of Fitzrovia's historic pubs, a one time haunt of Dylan Thomas, George Orwell, Augustus John and Julian Maclaren-Ross. In fact Thomas met his wife Caitlin in here and, legend has it, he was known to flash at women in here as well. Fitzrovia's associations with literature go back to the eighteenth century. In the twentieth century both Woolf and Shaw lived in Fitzroy Square, Pound and Lewis launched Blast! at the Restaurant de la Tour Eiffel in Percy Street. John Buchan lived in Portland Place and in The Thirty Nine Steps Richard Hannay has a flat there. Both Lawrences (D. H. and T. E.) took rooms here, as did Aleister Crowley, Wilfred Owen, Rupert Brooke and Katherine Mansfield.

and document of the moral degradation” of Bulgarian socialist society: “In the fall of the roof, I perceived a symbol of the inevitable collapse of the roof of lies, demagoguery, fallacies and deceit which the regime had constructed over our country.” Markov later wrote a play entitled *The Assassins*, a drama about a plot to kill the leader of a police state. That play was censored in a party newspaper article signed by Todor Zhivkov, then president of Bulgaria. Markov was warned by a friend that he was about to be arrested and fled to Italy. He eventually claimed political asylum in Britain.

Markov became a broadcast journalist for the BBC World Service and a writer for the CIA-funded Radio Free Europe. His weekly-broadcast programmes for RFE, largely consisting of his memoirs of life in Bulgaria, were called, “In Absentia, Reports About Bulgaria”. Not only did these memoirs describe the cultural life of Bulgaria, but they also exposed the otherwise-hidden life of Communist Party leaders, especially Zhivkov. Markov’s listening audience was

estimated to be about 60 per cent of Bulgaria’s adult population, even though RFE’s Bulgarian-language broadcasts were heavily jammed.

Following his father’s death, and the Bulgarian’s government’s refusal to allow Markov to visit his dying father in 1977, the tone of Markov’s broadcasts changed. Called “Personal Meetings with Todor Zhivkov”, they were biting satirical and a personal attack on Zhivkov. Markov wrote, “I have stressed over and over again that the principal evil in the life and work of Bulgarian writers, painters, composers, actors was interference by the Party. And behind the Party’s interference stood its chief organizer and executive, Todor Zhivkov. As a result of Zhivkov’s general, arbitrary and often quite unwarranted interference, Bulgarian cultural life became permeated by an atmosphere of insecurity and chaos...”

In July 1977 Zhivkov signed a Politburo decree proclaiming, “All measures could be used to neutralize enemy émigrés.” Markov received various warnings and anonymous threats to stop broadcasting but

ignored them. The Bulgarian secret police then made three attempts on Markov's life. The first was in Munich in the spring, when Markov was visiting friends and colleagues at Radio Free Europe. An agent tried but failed to poison Markov's drink at a dinner party honouring the writer. A second attempt occurred on the Italian island of Sardinia, where Markov was enjoying a summer vacation with his family.

The third attempt succeeded...

On 7th September 1978 (Zhivkov's 67th birthday) Markov was waiting at a bus stop on Waterloo Bridge. As he neared the waiting queue, he experienced a sudden, stinging pain in the back of his right thigh. He turned and saw a man bending down to pick up an umbrella. The man apologised and then hailed a black cab and sped off. Later that evening, Markov developed a high fever and was taken to a hospital, where he was treated for an undetermined form of blood poisoning. He went into shock and, after three days of agony, died.

Markov had earlier told doctors he suspected he'd been poisoned. Scotland Yard ordered a thorough autopsy of Markov's body. The forensic pathologists discovered a spherical metal pellet the size of a pin-head embedded in Markov's calf.

The pellet measured 1.52 mm in diameter and was composed of 90 per cent platinum and 10 per cent iridium. It had two holes with diameters of 0.35 mm drilled through it, producing an X-shaped cavity. Further examination by experts from Porton Down showed that the pellet contained traces of toxic ricin, a poison to which there is no known antidote.

After the fall of Communism the case was re-opened by British and Bulgarian investigators. They decided the poison and the umbrella-gun had been provided by the KGB. The

Bulgarian secret police had assassinated Markov as a birthday present for Zhikov.



A Letter From The Colonies

This time, Dr Leavingsoon, Our Man in New Zealand, writes to give you an idea of the kind of coarseness of Colonial ways, with a snippet of how a high-country family says grace.

Mutton and God's Grace

She walks across the yard to us, who are encamped by the shed.

"He wants you to join us for Tea up at the house tonight."

The farm hands stop and look at each other.

You know the lads...

"Oooo..."

"Ahhhh..."

"Be good and tell us everything, eh?"

That night I stumble over boots and jandals, getting my socks off and scrubbing my toes with my fingers to make the smell abate a bit.

We're all sitting 'round the table when the Boss walks in and eases himself down at the head of the feast.

Standard fare: home kill mutton and swedes with boiled cabbage and carrots.

Gravy? Ahh...gravy.

Mint sauce... "Boss". Of course.

Yes. Nice.

Then the farmer's wife—my apologies, I forget her name: Mrs Scurr will have to suffice—looks up and says, "Father will say grace."

Bravo! So proper.

Now being Jewish, albeit somewhat loosely, this never fails to make me a little uncomfortable. But not wanting to offend the custom I join in as we all hold hands, piously bowing our heads

in humility.

Of course, I'm peering out the corners of my eyes in case I miss some important detail or communal movement.

The Boss, hands clasped with his family and his guest, raises his eyes to the fly-spotted ceiling and, in cracking yet reverent tones rumbles,

"God...

—sniff—

"...on ya."

He grabs the swedes.



TRAVEL SECTION

In Search of Sheri-Dan

Nevison Casual goes on retreat with some debonair ascetics, and returns a changed man

High in the mountains of Himalaya, above the triple-canopied forests that echo with plaintive birdcalls in the valleys below, on a barren plateau strewn with rocks and empty port bottles, there rises from the clouds a granite fortress. In the local language they call it Sheri-Dan, which translates as "The House of Flying Fag-Ends". This, curious traveller, is the oldest Chappist Monastery in existence.

Until the mid twentieth century, Sheri-Dan was completely isolated from the outside world. Within its walls the monks distilled their beliefs and disciplines—and occasionally raw grain alcohol—and learned to perform amazing physical feats. Today, tales of the order are widely told, and it has even become fashionable for adventurous Europeans to spend time with the monks, hoping to find their Inner Chap, or at least return with some unusual cufflinks and a few anecdotes. So what is it like to scale the mountain path and soujourn with the

order? To save readers the ordeal of leaving their armchairs, your correspondent journeyed to find out.

As one stands uncertainly before the monastery's gates, all is quiet bar the moaning of the wind and the distant thwack of leather on willow. The walls are of ancient stone blocks covered in a mottled algae that, viewed from a certain angle, resolves itself into a pleasing houndstooth check. It's no use procrastinating: one reaches for the sculpted iron door-knocker that curiously resembles an elegant brogue... Before one's fingers touch the metal, the door creaks open and an immaculately attired butler beckons silently for one to enter. One's education has begun.

Every visitor comes with preconceptions. Is it true the monks purify their bodies by drinking Stella Artois to induce projectile vomiting? Is it true some penitents force themselves to wear jeans with "anti-fit" as a reminder of their earthly worthlessness? Is it true one monk meditated on top of a pole for 23 years? (Actually the Pole was Wozciek his valet, a strong man who found that carrying his inebriated master around the place made seeing to the holy man's needs a great deal easier.) So many questions. The reality of Chappist life is far more subtle.

Many Westerners mistakenly believe that Chappist monks take a vow of silence. In fact the vow they take is one of pertinence—idle nattering about trifles, such as politics, impending wars or the nature of being, are strictly forbidden and offenders are summarily locked in the stocks and pelted with stale scones. Quips, cheery salutations and the vivacious exchange of complex cocktails recipes, on the other hand, are actively encouraged. Many tourists visit Chappist temples simply to experience the transcendental ambience of spirited

post-dinner banter, the clinking of glassware, perhaps the honking of a battered old piano, all wafting through the calming haze of pipe smoke.

This discipline of limiting talk to the uttermost of essentials means that experienced monks have a finely honed ability to tell what someone else is thinking without recourse to words. Legend tells of a blind master of *gin-jitsu*, the Chappist art of making the perfect martini, who was much in demand as a cocktail waiter. He could divine customers' orders simply from the way their clothing rustled as they approached the bar, and knew instinctively when drinkers' glasses were empty by smelling their fear.

The heart of the Chappist monastery is the *Dojo* (or *Anecdojo*, to give it its full title), a large hall strewn with rugs, its walls adorned with traditional stuffed animal heads, dartboards, coat-hooks and the week's tea-making roster. Here trainees learn to spar with one-liners, wisecracks and party pieces.

Observe how the cocksure novice begins with a flurry of irony and affable bravura. His opponent, the old tutor, at first glance shy and helpless, smiles and counters with a single, well-placed *mot juste*, reducing the audience of kneeling acolytes to gales of laughter. Wounded, the young attacker can manage nothing better in return than a low swipe at his opponent's old age and decrepitude. The master's rejoinder is whispered into the youth's ear so *sotto voce* that no onlooker can catch it, but its effect is devastating. Ashen, the young man looks instinctively to his trouser fly—mortifyingly unbuttoned, a flash of shirt-tail clearly visible to all the world. (Was it so all along, or is this the work of the master's drawing-room legerdemain?) The bout is over.

Such punishing instruction must be carefully dispensed. After this lesson

the young monk will be carried to a comfortable wingback and a stiff cognac pressed into his sweating hand. With several hours of shoulder-clapping and good-natured joshing, his tutors must delicately rebuild his sense of panâche before his education can continue.

The Dojo is also where novices learn the healing discipline of "beditation". Few Westerners realise how much their lives would be improved by as little as eight hours of beditation a day. Here at Sheri-Dan, it is a core part of training. At 4.30 each morning, the hoarse iron bell sounds across the courtyard, summoning the groggy novices to rise from their port glasses and make their way to the Dojo. Here they settle into Egyptian cotton sheets on feather mattresses, and slip into a deep sleep. Stern masters stalk the hall, flexing Malacca canes, ready to give a fierce thwack to any young monk who allows himself to wake up even for a moment.

The Tea Ceremony

The Chappist tea ceremony is similar to the better-known Japanese one, but far more elaborate. In fact making the tea is just a small part of it. Novice monks must learn how to toast crumpets using only the rays of the sun. True masters can do this even at night. Each brother must prepare his own Gentleman's Relish by lying on a single anchovy until the pressure reduces it to a nourishing paste.

In the weeks leading up to the most holy festivals, one of the more promising aspirants may be sent out into the world to quest for the fabled Clotted Cream. Rumour has it that the monk who can return with some in time for Tea, then contrive to consume a prescribed quantity without dropping dead from a heart attack, is promptly invested as the new abbot.

Tie-Chi

Outsiders are often bemused by the sight of a group of Chappists moving very slowly for the first few hours of the morning. This is *Tie-Chi*, the Way of Taking Things Easy, and is how all adepts begin a day of study and prayer. The monks believe it is important to focus on the perfection of true harmony with the universe as they perform pure, simple actions, such as lathering their faces with shaving soap or choosing just the *right* tie. Besides, their hands are often quite shaky first thing in the morning. A Chappist master can appear to do absolutely nothing until lunchtime, at which point the observer will realise he has somehow managed to slip into an elegant three-piece, execute an immaculate Plattsburg tie knot and is

already perusing the wine list.

Chappists are also sometimes to be seen moving very slowly last thing at night, but this is usually down to absinthe-induced nerve damage.

Martial Arts

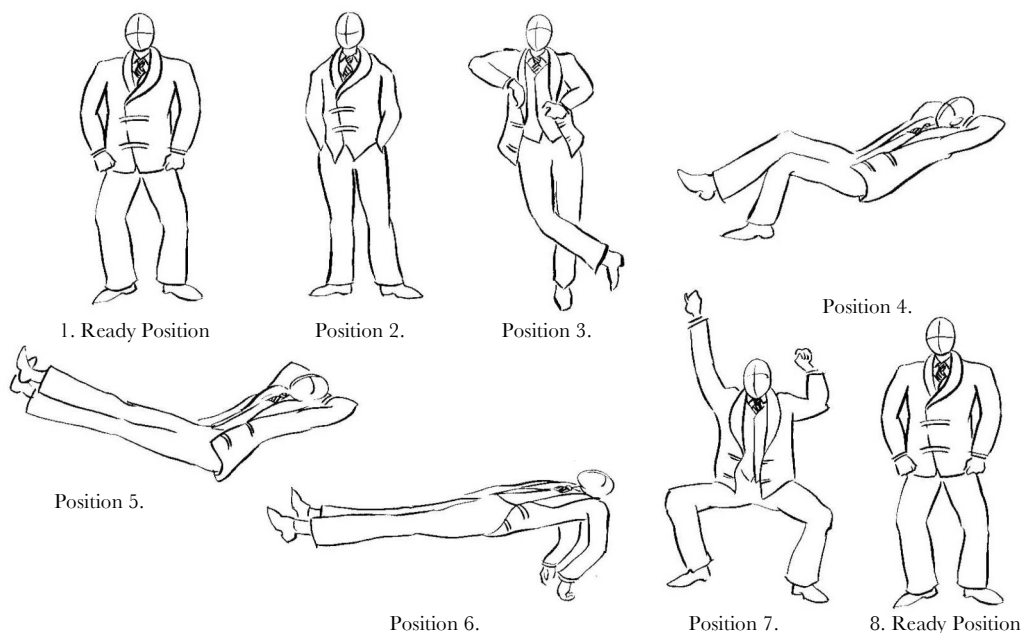
Inevitably outside attention tends to focus on the Chappists' martial skills, which are undeniably impressive.

Initiates begin with simple cane-fighting. The Chappist order prefers the crook-handled cane or umbrella, which can be used not only for thrusting and bludgeoning movements but also for hooking an opponent's feet from under him and for stealing someone else's drink from a good three feet away.

Next the trainee moves on to the pipe. The Himalayan fighting briar is a

Not So Idle Chatta

Many of the Chappists' louche movements were long ago codified into set sequences for training purposes. Novices must master all 117 of these sequences, known as *chatta*, and must perform them before the critical eyes of a panel of venerable judges. Each roguish gesture, each languid sprawl must be executed exactly as prescribed, the one flowing into the next in the stylised representation of a hypothetical situation. The one below is called *From Dawn Till Dusk Till Dawn* and is said to represent the unattainable perfection of the ideal day. The details of these sequences are never written down (well, apart from the one below, I suppose). Instead they are passed on from master to pupil in an informal chat after dinner.



justly feared weapon, and the monk must master all three types: the light, finely-balanced throwing pipe, the short, squat stabbing pipe, and the long, slender blow-pipe, with integrated rifling. From a position behind an aspidistra in the smoking room of one of London's more famous clubs, a Chappist assassin is rumoured to have propelled a water-filled dart with such accuracy that it travelled up the stem of the Club President's own briar as he flourished it mid-anecdote, and comprehensively extinguished the flame. Faced with such humiliation, the man had no choice but to retire to the library with the club revolver. Conjecture is still rampant as to which of his rivals hired the marksman.

Beyond this, the monk might specialise in one of the more esoteric fighting systems, the powers of which are almost without limit. The Spinning Cufflinks of Death, for example, are so devastating that no adept would ever be so reckless as to shoot his cuffs in public.

Physical mastery of the weapons, of course, is merely the precursor to a deeper, mystical learning. An elderly monk, cheerfully waving his pipestem by way of conversational elaboration, may in fact be describing in the air an ancient magic rune. All who see it are mesmerised by the master's radiant élan, rooted to the spot, unable to tear their attention away from his amusing story until—at a time of his choosing—he enunciates the punchline. In ancient times Chappist raiding parties would use this trick to immobilise the guards of an enemy compound. While the master wove his *bon mot*, his minions would storm the fortress and ransack the drinks cabinet. For this reason, unlike many other orders, the Chappists never bothered developing their own beer or liqueur.

And so, as the doors of Sheri-Dan clang behind me and I begin the long

trek home, do I feel any different? Readers, my life has changed forever. I know the recipe for a Corpse Reviver, can distinguish an Oxford shoe from a Derby at 200 paces in the dark, and know a very funny story about John Le Mesurier. And I retain just 10 per cent of my liver function. Truly, there is a God.



CLUB NOTES

Events Happening Soon:

The Golden Secret

Saturday 2nd February

Time: 12.30pm

Start Location: Gordon's Wine Bar, 47 Villiers Street, London WC2N 6NE

www.gordonswinebar.com

The year is 1948. As Britain struggles after the end of World War Two the globe is overshadowed by the immensely strong and aggressive USSR, the awesome power of mighty atom, the rapid collapse of the empires of old and new dangers from all sides. This small island has no peace and instead must fight ever harder not just to prosper but even to survive.

An overworked, exhausted and bankrupt Britannia has millions to protect and feed, huge and draining obligations overseas and a desperate need to remain a relevant power in a rapidly changing world. In order to reduce strain and costs where possible, certain tasks are not handled by the government directly but by trusted third parties. Such a time has now arisen with a discreet early morning call being made to a small but respectable Club...

To take part in this event, make your discreet way to Gordon's Wine Bar for 12.30 on Saturday. It may be

crowded but once inside you will be contacted by someone—wander around to try and find familiar faces and check outside if it is very busy.

Please note—the day starts as soon as you get to Gordon's and NSC Committee Members may not be “themselves” but portraying other characters in the theme of the day to add to the mood. So, for example, Mr Scarheart may appear to be a burly Hungarian sailor with a penchant for baklava. Or Mr Hartley a female jazz singer from Paris with a troubled past.

It is suggested that you wear shoes you will be comfortable walking around London in. A notebook and pen, small A-Z, thinking tobacco and full hip flask may also be of use. Hats, trenchcoats and so on encouraged. There is no charge to take part but money for food and drink would be a good idea. Death by Webley, sword stick, or “accident” a possibility.

The Burlesque Brunch

Sunday 3rd February

11am–11pm

The Punch Tavern, 99 Fleet Street, London EC4Y 1DE

Tickets: £26 for a full day including brunch, or £13 for a half day from 2pm on (no brunch), only in advance from www.sophiejonasdesigns.co.uk (in the Cornucopia section)

Special offer for NSC Members:
Champagne only £21 a bottle (normally £27)

Dress: Something retro, perhaps a little louche, or just what you're still wearing from the night before

After the rip-snorting success of the Burlesque Brunch in December, the tenacious Miss Tenacity Flux, burlesque performer, baker and designer of ladythings, is holding what is expected to become a monthly event. Your ticket buys you a 12-hour assault on your senses, sanity and self-control:

the day begins with a hearty brunch from 12pm to 2pm (included in the ticket price).

During brunch there will be a table-to-table fashion show of vintage-style lingerie designed by Miss Flux's alter ego Miss Sophie Jonas and, I'll wager, much dabbling at fevered brows with spotted handkerchiefs. During the afternoon there will be burlesque performers including Diva Hollywood, Red Sarah and Ruby Rose, as well as another fashion show, this time of corsetry and jewellery. The day will also feature the “Not Cricket” pub quiz, the Bruncherette, with her tray of delights and a DJ into the evening.

Film: Anna Mae Wong: Frosted Yellow Ribbons

Friday 8th February

7–8.30pm

Ondaatje Wing Theatre, The National Portrait Gallery, St Martin's Place, London WC2H 0HE (020 7306 0055)

Tickets: £5/£3 concessions

This UK film premiere, with an introduction by directors Elaine Mae Woo and Ed Manwell, is the story of the pioneering Chinese-American actress who, from humble beginnings in a Chinese laundry, went on to star in films such as Technicolor's *Toll Of The Sea* (1922), E.A. Dupont's *Piccadilly* (1929)—which was featured at a NSC Film Night last year—and Josef von Sternberg's *Shanghai Express* (1932) with Marlene Dietrich.

A portrait of Anna May Wong is also featured in the Vanity Fair Portraits exhibition.

Salong Vegaholm

Saturday 9th February

From 4pm

Västmannagatan 14, 111 24
Stockholm, Sweden

Admission: Free

Dress: Flapper, Chap, Geovictwardian,

suits (three piece of course), the New Look, smoking jackets, dandy, teddy boys. (There seems to be an express ban on: the 1990s, jeans, lowcut trousers and bare midriffs, unless part of a burlesque outfit.)

RSVP no later than 6th February, preferably by International Postal Service or by telephone (field telephone: +46 (0)70 99 33 888) or, as a last resort, by electronic mail to little.ego@gmail.com.

The organisers of this event, Club Member Miss Anne Holmes and Vega Andersson, invite you to Miss Holmes' home in Stockholm for what sounds like quite a variety show. They write:

“The doors to the intimate parlour will stand ajar for folk interested in crafts—such as cross-stitching, crocheting, knitting, reading and writing poetry and all while drinking tea—from four o'clock in the afternoon. If you are but yearning for delicious decadence we suggest an arrival no later than seven.

“Throughout the evening you will be served different types of entertainment ranging from swing dancing to storytelling to the odd aria sung by yours truly. If your head is filled with ideas and your heart with inspiration please do feel free to bring your talent with you and entertain a hungry crowd! We do ask, however, that you inform one of the two hostesses beforehand.

“We will be serving simple aliment during the course of the evening, but we suggest our guests bring their own handicrafts and needlework as well as drinks. (The hostesses appreciate a good G&T as well as sumptuous amounts of Bailey's).”

Miss Holmes says she may be of assistance with accommodation and is also offering guided tours of her city. Surely an opportunity not to be missed!

The Black Cotton Club

Saturday 9th February,
10pm
Volupte, 7–9 Norwich Street, London EC4A
Admission: £10 before 11pm, £12
Dress: Ravishing and refined, in a 1920s–1940s glamour stylee, I imagine

A regular club night devoted to the gangster jazz (well, more specifically, “hot house swing, gypsy jazz, race rhythms, valentino vibes, reefer rhumba, cowboy swing, be-bop jump and balboa bounce”. I hope that means more to you than it does to me).

Loss: The Hendricks Valentine's Ball

Thursday 14th February
10pm–4am
Parker Macmillan, 47 Chiswell Street, London EC1Y 4SB
Tickets £15 in advance (from www.thelasttuesdaysociety.org) or £65 for a “family” ticket of five
Dress: Decaying Beauty

The evening will be introduced by Virginia Ironside with a seminar on *How to Deal With a Broken Heart*, followed by divers depressing and miserable acts, including a specially commissioned miserable show from The Real Tuesday Weld, a Crying Booth from You Me Bum-Bum Train, Ana Silvera, a Meeting of The Sad Poets Society, sponsored by The Liberal, plus regulars London's Saddest Fado Band, Barralopes, The Alan Weekes Quartet, The Kingston Quartet and onion-chopping with Viktor Wynd.

Actuarius and the Memsahib in Town

Saturday 16th February
11am
The Rivoli Bar, The Ritz Hotel, 150 Piccadilly, London W1J 9BR (020

7493 8181)

Admission: Free, but cocktails aren't cheap

Mr and Mrs Actuarious are in town this weekend and intend to maintain their usual practice of taking a sharpener at the stunning Art Deco Rivoli Bar. Members are encouraged to join them.

Go-Go-A-La-Mode

Saturday 16th February

7pm-1am

The 100 Club, 100 Oxford St, London W1, (020 7636 0933)

Admission: £10 in advance (£8 for members) or £12 on the door (£10 for members). See www.actionettes.com.

As an antidote to London Fashion Week, the Actionettes present a celebration of retro fashion.

An all-girl, twelve-strong dance troupe, the Actionettes perform synchronised routines to songs by sixties girl groups—think The Shangri-Las, The Ronettes and The Marvelettes. For this special night,

they're joined by Holly Golightly for bourbon-soaked bluesy tales of good times and broken hearts. Support comes from riotous Betty and the Werewolves.

Why not start the evening with the Actionettes' dance class (7.30 to 8pm) and learn some moves? Watch as the ladies burst into wild go-go routines decked out in their new matching outfits, designed by king of sixties Paris fashion Tim Bargeot for the occasion.



IF YOU HAVE any ideas or suggestions for Club events or articles for this Newsletter, then do get in touch with Mr Scarheart. We are always keen to hear from the Members, whether it is information on interesting events and nights or suggestions for this Newsletter.

Remember that the NSC is happy to promote events that you yourself are involved with.



Until next time, Chumrades!

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