

ARTS & CULTURE



C R I T I C U S

The Squalor of Opulence

B Y G . B . T E N N Y S O N

Babylon is fallen, is fallen, that great city. . .

FLYING INTO McCarron Airport in Las Vegas on one of those blindingly bright desert afternoons you see the Las Vegas Strip only a short distance away stretched out like the high end of the Monopoly board, with hotels piled up and packed together on Broadway and Park Place and all the rest a nondescript flatland. One knows that off in the distance are the lesser Tennessee, Atlantic, and Mediterranean Avenue areas, such as the old original downtown Las Vegas, and that farther away yet in north Vegas are the proliferating housing tracts and gated retirement enclaves lurking there like future dolmens or hecatombs in the wasteland. But it is the great pleasure domes that grab the eye and that on closer approach grow larger and larger as though they had collectively swallowed the contents of one of Alice's "Drink Me" bottles and begun swelling into immensity.

It was to one such immensity that Criticus betook himself on a warm summer week with the aim in mind of enjoying a small family reunion with three cousins suitable for the occasion, which is to say, three who

liked gambling and casinos. One, a first cousin twice removed whom Criticus had not seen for donkey's years, was celebrating his twenty-first birthday by being able to gamble legally in the gambling capital of the world. He was carded several times, once by a tart of a blackjack dealer who impertinently remarked of his driver's license, "That's a good forgery." Well, he does look young, but the help should know its place. The other two cousins, also not long seen — a first cousin *tout simple*, and her husband, hence a cousin-in-law — were seasoned gambling veterans and proved it by actually coming out somewhere near even when all was done, a considerably better record than Criticus himself could boast.

Criticus also took the occasion of visiting Las Vegas to arrange to have dinner with a longtime and rather raffish but ever good-humored friend who lives and, very occasionally, works there. We'll call him Seymour. To see him in operation one would think he was a bookie or drug runner, for he is inseparable from his mobile phone, but I discovered that the object of his endless phoning is simply to inquire after the well-being at any given moment of his girlfriend or the well-being at any given moment of his brother's dog. This, I suspect, is largely what all those other joined-at-the-ear cell phone users are up to. When I told Seymour I would be in Vegas to visit with my cousins, he took it

G.B. Tennyson is CPR's European and Casino Correspondent and longtime member of the English Department at UCLA. His most recent book is A Barfield Reader (Wesleyan, 1999), which will be reviewed in a future number of CPR.

into his head that these were country cousins from Arkansas, and nothing I could say to him subsequently could disabuse him of this notion. In fact, the people he thought were the Clampetts are horse breeders from the Maryland hunt country, but Seymour persists to this day in thinking otherwise, and Criticus took up the notion and began referring to them in Seymouristic terms.

When Ellie May and I weren't gambling (Jed and Jethro kept at it pretty steadily, with side trips by Jethro to casino discos), we were fondly remembering old times and old tales and laughing at gilded butterflies and generally being God's spies looking down at the dizzying pace of the world. When not doing that, we were visiting virtually all of the larger hotels on the strip, where, come to think of it, we occasionally

gambled as well. On these forays Jethro and, once, Jed also came along. The loftier purpose of such visits, however, was for Criticus to see for himself the New Las Vegas, so he could give Constant Readers an authoritative cultural report on the meaning of it all.

Probably no one old enough to read these lines is unaware of the general history of Las Vegas, so I need not rehearse it in detail. Instead I offer a capsule version based on the names and locations of casinos. In the beginning there was what is now downtown Vegas, the Fremont Street area, with hotels and casinos such as the Golden Nugget, Binion's Horseshoe (an art deco gem, by the way), the Four Queens, and Lady Luck. In other words, names emphasizing gambling. After the war when Vegas moved uptown, so to speak, to what is known as the Strip, and when high rise hotel-casinos featuring entertainers and musical and variety shows appeared, the places bore names like the Sands, the Sahara, the Aladdin, the Desert Inn, suggesting vaguely some middle eastern retreats. Though this second phase emphasized entertainment as well as gambling, it still meant that Vegas was dominated by high rollers, Hollywood glitterati, and Mafia mobsters. No wonder the Rat Pack was at home there and is now being memorialized by a show at the Desert Inn in which modern performers attempt to recreate the famous five of that era.

It appears it was Caesar's Palace that led the way to the current round of names as well as to the mega family-resort-hotel-cum-theme-park concept that now dominates. So we have such grandiosities in the 3,000-room

range as the Excalibur, the Mirage, the Tropicana, the Luxor, the Mandalay Bay, New York New York, the MGM Grand, the Stratosphere, and most recently the Bellagio and the Venetian, the latter just opened in June and boasting "every room a suite." Italy, you can see, has been getting a good workout, and one half expected the next giant hotel to be the Naples or even the

Sicilian, but instead the latest is Paris, which opened just after Criticus had left but not before he inspected its completed exterior, of which more later.

It is evident from the names alone that in modern Vegas gambling and desert terms (save for the Mirage) have lost their savor. Rather, names that suggest other, mostly exotic places dominate, showing how far Vegas has gone in trying to move upscale, away from the common

associations with gambling. Indeed, *gambling* is a word shunned in the New Vegas in favor of *gaming*, a word also adopted by the state, as in Nevada Gaming Commission, and presumably thought to be more genteel than gambling.

Of the New Vegas, Criticus was already familiar with a good deal, not least the names of the recent hotels. But most of them had gone up or been enlarged since Criticus had last been in Las Vegas. He felt it his duty as Casino Correspondent to inspect as many as time allowed, setting himself a goal of a dozen. Time permitted inspections of only about 10, but each will be reported on with varying degrees of fullness.

BEGINNING AT the farthest reach of the Strip we looked in on Mandalay Bay. This was much favored by Jethro because it has not only a disco but a very large swimming pool area dense with palms, waterways for gliding along on rubber rafts, and above all an imitation lagoon onto which machine-generated waves come up, if not quite like thunderous dawns, at least with a bit of a surge as they roll to the shore carrying with them swimming revelers. All that Criticus found lacking was a recording of, say, Lawrence Tibbett singing "On the Road to Mandalay" or, better yet, a recording of the poem recited in the Cockney dialect it was originally written in. This would have subdued the jollity, but it is worth remembering that were it not for Kipling very few would ever have heard of Mandalay, and those few are mostly now in their rocking chairs, Kipling having been long since

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banned from the schoolroom for political incorrectness. Quite wrongly, of course, as the poem is about a British soldier's longing for a Burmese girl, which today would be celebrated as flouting convention.

Adjacent to the Mandalay Bay and connected to it by a sleek tram manufactured by the Austrian company that makes quad lifts for ski resorts lies, or rather rises up, the Luxor. This is the golden-colored pyramid-shaped hotel in front of which sits a massive Sphinx. One evening while Jethro was disco-ing at the "Ra" in Luxor, the rest of us Clampetts were gambling not far away. Criticus had already squandered rather too much on dollar slot machines, which don't seem to be paying at all well anywhere in Vegas this season, so he repaired to his eternal favorite, roulette, while Jed and Ellie May ensconced themselves at the blackjack table. The nice thing about roulette is that it took me an hour and half to lose \$100, and I walked away with one of three free drinks they offered, which meant that for a mere \$33 and change I had bought a quite small low-ball glass. On the almost brighter side, we think it was at the Luxor where we spotted a Krispy Kreme concession, and I resolved to return there on a later day to buy one of those delights that are only now reaching the western states, figuring it would cost less than \$33 and taste better than watered whisky. But I never got back.

INSTEAD WE moved on to the Excalibur, also connected by the tram. The pictures of this *faux* mediaeval castle are so ubiquitous that I am sure everyone knows what it looks like outside. Inside is even worse. Imagine, if you will, the designer of a miniature golf course being given an illustrated book of Arthurian legends and told to go at it. As for the footbridge-adjacent New York New York, with its imitation Statue of Liberty and its imitation New York Stock Exchange intertwined with a roller coaster (Coney Island?) the best that Criticus can manage to say for it is that it is smaller than the actual New York.

Over another footbridge, this one spanning the Strip itself, to the MGM Grand with, on the corner, an enormous golden lion, said to bear the name "Metro." As with all the other newer hotels, the Grand has a theme, in this case, the movies, or at least MGM movies. Pictures of stars, a live lion habitat display, a restaurant called the Brown Derby, and so on. Also, as with so

many of these theme hotels, the designers occasionally forget which imitation they are in. Why, for instance, should the Mandalay Bay have a House of Blues disco or a Russian restaurant called Red Square, or the Excalibur a WCW Nitro Grill featuring big screen wrestling matches, or the Monte Carlo a pub and micro brewery, or the MGM Grand a Studio 54 disco as though Andy

Warhol or the wayward-wanton Edie Sedgwick had anything to do with MGM? The answer is that these compounds seek to be all entertaining things to all entertainment-challenged people and sometimes the theme just doesn't encompass everything, so they add another kitchen sink. Thus most of the Strip hotels have not only a half-dozen or more restaurants in every price range but they seem all to have a Chinese one

and most have an Italian and a Japanese one as well and many have a southwestern one. The Grand even has an outpost of Nathan's Famous offering hot dogs better left in New York, or in New York New York.

On the last day that the cousins were there (Criticus was staying a day longer), three of us left Jed to the craps table and to a variation on Blackjack called Spanish 21 (blackjack with no number ten cards, who knows why?) which he had unaccountably become attached to. We proceeded to the Venetian, which obliged us to submit to a Vegas scam that is more costly than roulette, more like slot machines. That is to say, we took a cab. Las Vegas Boulevard, the Strip, is very wide but quite crowded with vehicles, mostly cabs, so progress is slow. To insure that it be even slower the powers have so set the light sequences that at best one can move only one block at a time and sometimes it takes two or three lights to reach the next street. The meter runs the whole while. Thus, although you could see the Venetian just a few streets away, the time to get there was perhaps ten minutes and the tariff was \$7. The outside temperature being 102°, we had little alternative.

The Venetian of course seeks to imitate the Queen of the Adriatic and does it in typical Vegas style. That is, it simply throws together every obvious thing one can think of about Venice and imitates it inside an overpoweringly massive structure. The parking attendants, male and female, are dressed as gondoliers, there is an imitation St. Mark's Square and an imitation Grand Canal with imitation gondolas which one can pay to ride in, propelled forward by imitation gondo-



liers under an imitation Rialto Bridge and an imitation blue sky overhead flecked with imitation white clouds. Curiously, this sky actually darkens the scene in comparison with the real and brilliant summer sky outside, but the false sky will not let in any rain or cold, which makes it really quite unlike Venice in the winter, or for that matter Las Vegas. Alongside the twisting but much abbreviated Grand Canal the Venetian has lined up its shops, thirty-eight (!) of them now open says the publicity. One wonders whether it is a hotel or a shopping mall, though it's rather upmarket for your everyday mall. So, just to insure that the otherwise pretentious and self-important Venetian does not entirely forget the common folk, one of its offerings is a Madame Tussaud's museum called "Celebrity Encounter" featuring wax models of "over a hundred of your favorite celebrities." It sounded too horrible to visit.

After the cousins had left at midday the next day, Criticus, knowing he was to meet Seymour for dinner, found he had time for only one more hotel excursion, though he dearly wanted to add another, namely the Stratosphere, which having been built by, and been the downfall of, Bob Stupak, promised to be a pinnacle of vulgarity. Stupak had owned what Criticus remembers from the past as the loudest, most neon-ridden, most vulgar casino he has ever seen. So bad it was good. The late Madame Criticus was duly appalled, but like Jed she settled down at the craps table and let the world go by. This wonder place was called the Vegas World and on its site Stupak constructed the Stratosphere, but somehow it financially collapsed upon him. Even the roller coaster on the top of what looks like the Seattle Space Needle began to malfunction. It was all taken over by others, and I only hope they preserved the Stupak style. If so, it certainly qualifies as *vaut le voyage*. Under my time constraints, however, it was not worth the taxi ride.

SO, IT was onward by means of a monorail behind the Grand, taking one to Bally's and passing the while the pools and parks and water rides affiliated with these hotels though cagily charging separate admission. Debouching from the monorail, one moves through the rather boring Bally's already showing its age and its lack of any current-day *de rigueur* distinctive theme to another over-the-street footbridge leading to Bellagio, from which yet another footbridge leads to Caesar's Palace, only glanced at this time. These little trams, monorails, and footbridges are attempts to thwart the taxi monopoly: may their tribe increase.

Along with the Venetian, the Bellagio was one of the two hotels Criticus most wanted to visit. And not be-

cause Seymour had once fleetingly worked there, though that gave it a piquant, personal touch, the site of any Seymour employment being a great rarity. No, it was because it had opened last October to such fanfare, both as a structure and as the repository of an expensive art collection amassed by its owner, the Las Vegas casino tycoon Steve Wynn, who also owns the Mirage (the one with the pretend volcano in front and Siegfried and Roy inside) and the Golden Nugget. Bellagio is supposed to reflect the Italian lakeside town of the same name on the shores of Lake Como. If anything the size of this hotel ever went up on those shores, you can be sure that the Italian government would invite President Bubba to bomb it as if it were Serbia or Iraq.

MANY A grand hostelry elsewhere in the world has some paintings and sculpture of undoubted quality, but none I know of has an actual art gallery with Monets and Van Goghs and Jackson Pollocks. So Bellagio, thought Criticus, must be very special. Initial signs were encouraging. The Bellagio has highly visible notices upon entering to the effect that the hotel does not permit in its halls anyone under the age of eighteen, and those who are must be prepared to show room identification upon request. It means that the vast army of morbidly obese proles, adult and minor, who crowd, trip, and jostle on the floors of every other casino, including even the "gaming areas" (why is this not illegal? where are the narcs when you really need them?), are blessedly absent from the Bellagio. Like the Venetian, the seemingly endless long marble corridors have in some measure an almost European feel, albeit too contrived, a bit too large, as though the model were less a hotel of *grand luxe et tradition* like, say, the Beau Rivage Palace in Lausanne than like Buckingham Palace. And where a hotel like the London or Paris Ritz will have a bar and restaurant or two and a boutique here and there, such as a Cartier or a Van Cleef and Arpels, the Bellagio has nine restaurants and many shops. Among the latter there are Chanel, Giorgio Armani (and not the XChange, thank you), Tiffany, Gucci, Hermès. Among the restaurants, Criticus lingered for a moment outside the Picasso, which features real Picassos on the walls, just to study the menu. The cheaper of the two *prix fixe* lunches was \$85, the same price the Bellagio shop was asking for a polo shirt with its logo on it.

All of this was appropriately sobering after the intoxication of the elegance of the setting. Even more sobering was the encounter with the Bellagio art gallery. It turns out that this highly publicized feature has an admission charge, \$10 I think, and worse, had a very long

line indeed, too long for Criticus to stand around in. The admission charge was a bit of a surprise, but then I learned Steve Wynn had in May bought for his gallery a Seurat for \$35.2 million. I also learned he later bought a Cézanne shortly after it had sold at auction for \$60.5 million, a price he presumably had to top to induce its new owner to let it go. When you part with that kind of petty cash, you must charge admission.

THE SHOP next to the gallery sold reproductions, videos, and various kinds of kitsch from the collection, just as do gallery shops the world over, so one could pretty well tell what was in the gallery. Impressive for a single collection, to be sure, but it's not the Metropolitan. There was a stack of four ceramic squares, four by four inches, which reproduced some Jackson Pollock dribblings, diverting as decoration, even if probably intolerable in full form on a wall. An eager saleswoman tried to hustle Criticus into buying this little set. It cost \$125, making each tray about the same price as Criticus's drink at the Luxor. "And what do you do with them," I asked. She thought and thought and finally said, "Use them for a hot plate."

Across from the Bellagio and next door to Bally's stands the newest Strip mega hotel, Paris. It had not opened when I was there, but the outside had been completed. It was a relief to see that they have finally exhausted the Italian theme, but it was still like old times to note that the way of setting up the Paris was completely in tune with all the rest. Think of famous Parisian landmarks. How about the Eiffel Tower and the Arc de Triomphe? Think of typically Parisian things. How about sidewalk cafés and croissants? Throw in the Hall of Mirrors from Versailles (it's only a few miles outside of Paris), and *voilà!* it's Paris. Or at least as much Paris as Middle America is disposed to want to encounter. This does not include cathedrals like Notre Dame, of course. Mustn't overdo it and rile the ACLU with the wrong sort of imitations.

And that is finally what Las Vegas is about. It is designed to be a gathering of imitations because that is what its customers want. Not the actual Paris, or Venice, or Egypt, or Mandalay but a safe and sanitized Cecil B. DeMille imitation of those places. And having them all together is very much cheaper than separate trips, even if you have to pay Vegas taxi prices. It is the paradigm of what has become the American Dream. But at the heart of it is a great void, a spiritual squalor. For all its glitz and neon, Vegas lacks a soul. It is like the backlot of Universal or Warner Brothers, where Manhattan streets and Old West saloons forlornly jos-

tle one another, a miscellaneous collection of stage sets.

One is reminded of the current novel by Julian Barnes, *England, England*. It projects a future in which the entire Isle of Wight has been turned into a theme park featuring imitations of all the celebrated facets of English life and history from knights in armor to Westminster Abbey to a replica of Buckingham Palace where the royals appear on the balcony once every day and wave to the crowd. By this means, no one need visit the rest of actual England at all. This Barnesian conceit has been most favorably received by the chattering classes in its home country as a brilliantly original idea. This can only mean that these sophisticates have not been to Las Vegas and that Barnes has. He may even have wanted to nab this idea for print before the latest Disneyism opens in Orange Country where the Imagineers are preparing a theme park to be called California Adventure. It will replicate the most famous objects and places in California: an imitation Golden Gate Bridge next to an imitation Yosemite cheek by jowl with an imitation Malibu or Pebble Beach. Criticus suggests that they add an imitation Indian Casino and thus render it unnecessary to go to Vegas at all.

Now, all that being said, don't think that Criticus didn't enjoy himself or would not return. Of course he enjoyed himself, enjoyed himself greatly, and not least because he got to see his beloved country cousins after so long a time, for they are treasures. He also got to observe Seymour on his native heath. (Seymour revealed at dinner that night that he now had a job at Caesar's Palace; since then he has revealed that he quit after a week. Some things in life *are* constant.) Moreover, Criticus has a taste for the bizarre and the grotesque. And yes, Criticus enjoyed himself because he likes occasionally to gamble (it runs in the family), even knowing he is more likely to lose than win. And if Vegas has anything approaching a soul, it is gambling. For all the modern family resort notions that currently reign in the New Vegas, it's really the gambling, stupid. All the rest, no matter how lavish, is froth.

ASKED SEYMOUR, who likes it there, what was the reason that anyone would want to live in Vegas, as opposed to visiting. Like the question about the use of the ceramic Jackson Pollock tiles, this one seemed to stump my respondent. Finally, he said, "Well there's Red Rock Canyon" (a mountain cluster west of Vegas). How perfect that the one thing he could think of was there before there ever was a Vegas, is not in the town at all, and will be there when only the Ozymandian remnants of Vegas hotels are left standing and the lone and level sands stretch far away.

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