

MINE was a rather small boarding school where nearly all of the boys were far more interested in rugby and cricket than they were in anything stupid, like the arts. I, of course, was one of the weirdies – a select and motley crew (as was constantly brought home to us) who could easily be recognised by our tweaks to the uniform and a jocular disdain for the illiterate hearties. And although a scorned and endangered species, whenever the annual House Play Competition was looming, suddenly we were hotly in demand: no sudden enthusiasm for the dramatic arts, no of course not – but a silver trophy was at stake, you see, and this, I am afraid, is the only language the establishment understood.

The usual approach in the past had been to hack out a half-hour chunk of Shakespeare, or maybe a gobblet of Shaw, with no women in it. The next step was to butcher without mercy the playwright's carefully constructed dialogue, cadences and construction, ad-lib like crazy, wave about one's arms and gallop up to the end, panting. But I had the idea of writing an original play: tailor-made with just three male roles, and bang on 30 minutes. I say 'original', but ... well I was an ardent fan of the Theatre of the Absurd, as it was called, and my hugest idols were Beckett, arguably the founder of the feast, and of course the mighty Harold Pinter. My play was called *The Reunion* – half a T.S. Eliot title with a concept nicked from Jean Anouilh (or was it Brecht?) containing a fair amount of sub-Godot and maybe no more than 70 percent thieving from Mr Pinter himself (but the pauses – they came quite naturally because none of us properly had learned the lines). We won the cup, though I've always felt that Pinter was more deserving than I. My guilt was eased as the decades passed and he steadily amassed honours and prizes even in excess of the House Play Competition Cup, these culminating in the Nobel, which has consistently eluded me.

Still, though – it's been on my conscience. And so when I had the pleasure of lunching with Lady Antonia Fraser, Pinter's wife of 28 years until his death in 2008, I felt I just had to come clean. She was highly amused by the story, and assured me that Harold would

Yes, you must go

Lady Antonia Fraser's memoir *Must You Go?* is a tribute to her late husband, playwright Harold Pinter. With a confession to make over plagiarism, **Joseph Connolly** takes her to lunch at Richard Caring's latest venture



A cool and elegant spot ... Lady Antonia with Joseph at the Dean Street Townhouse.

have been no less than flattered and encouraging. Phew, what a relief – that's that out of the way: okay then – let's eat. We were sitting very comfortably in low red velvet chairs at a mercifully equally low table in the dark panelled and very much cosier part of this latest outpost in the ever advancing empire that is Richard Caring's. This already encompasses everything you can think of from *The Ivy* and *J. Sheekey to Le Caprice and Annabel's*, by way of an awful lot more besides. Maybe the only two happening places he lacks are *The Wolseley* and *The Groucho Club* – and it was bang opposite *The Groucho* where we found ourselves: *The Dean Street Townhouse* is an extremely cool and elegant 39-room hotel and restaurant on the site of what until nine months ago was a loud and nasty big pub. There is a bright and buzzy brasserie side to it, peopled by suitably bright and buzzy people – and then our

very swagged and upholstered section: stylish, and gentler. The whole place is so confident and reassuring, as if it has been here for ever – and I imagine *The Groucho* is spitting. Spookily, the brownish pinky autumnal wallpaper was a virtual echo of the fabric of Lady Antonia's jacket: she remarked upon it immediately. Mmm ... I wondered whether to pass on the information that had just been confided to me by Gordana, the ever-charming front-of-house (I'd never been here before, but she dots about the Caring domain). And then I just came out with it: the wallpaper – designed by the renowned portrait painter Jonathan Yeo – half conceals lots of rude bits: yes, it's true – peer very closely and you can just make out distended body parts and orifices. The same may not be said, I rush to underline, of Lady Antonia's jacket. She ordered a twice-baked haddock soufflé, and I went for

scallops in the half shell with wild boar – largely because it sounded rather nuts. We had taken a while to get to the menu, because of course we had been talking books. The gracious and highly entertaining Lady Antonia likes to attend literary events, and is extremely good at speaking at them – as is her sister, the novelist Rachel Billington, with whom I once or twice have shared a platform. Currently Lady Antonia is promoting her very moving, funny and heartfelt memoir of Pinter, entitled *Must You Go?* The title is a reference to his remark to her at the end of the dinner party in 1975 where first they had met. She, beguiled by his "sparkling black eyes", had thought no, not really – and five years later, following considerable scandals, they were married. This must be about her two-dozen book now – all those famous biographies, most notably *Mary Queen of Scots*, as well as a string of detective fiction

FACTFILE

- ❑ **DEAN STREET TOWNHOUSE**
- 69-71 Dean Street, W1
- Tel: 020-7434 1775
- ❑ Dining room open all day.
- ❑ Food: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆
- ❑ Service ★★★★★☆☆☆☆
- ❑ The Feeling: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆
- ❑ Cost: About £100 for a three-course meal for two with wine.

featuring her heroine Jemima Shore. Her parents, of course, were Lord and Lady (Elizabeth) Longford, both extremely accomplished hands.

The soufflé was a pretty little thing, and much enjoyed ("light in a good and fishy way – better than *The Wolseley*", she said – high praise indeed). I got just two small scallops ... but never mind that: where's the boar? A fellow came along and pointed. "There," he said. "Where?" I said. "There," he said. And lo – yes indeed, four or five little brown full stops scattered around the scallops: maybe this is an in-joke, is it? Like the wallpaper? Who can say? Anyway, I eked it out with excellent warm ciabatta from a wooden slab, and deep yellow unsalted butter. Lady Antonia's main was in fact a larger portion of a salad starter of Dorset crab. It wasn't very large – but attractively red and green (fennel, chichory and pink grapefruit, I'm fairly sure) but ... um ... where's the crab? Are we playing another round of their secret game? "I've found a bit!" she reported in triumph. But actually there turned out to be a fair amount more, lurking, and she enjoyed it as much as crab salad may ever be enjoyed, depending upon the hunger quotient. I had corn fed chicken with pickled girolles and this season's trendiest vegetable, broad beans. Which were peeled, hardish and good,

and so were the new potatoes. The chicken was a bashed out breast – not that tender, and not that flavoursome. I reached for the pepper mill and ground away at that for quite some time to no effect whatever for the simple reason, as inspection confirmed, that its innards were devoid of peppercorns. The mill was briskly replaced, and the pepper helped. The mushrooms were, as advertised, pickled, though I can't understand why: girolles derive nothing from vinegar.

We had been enjoying a *Gavi de Gavi* – one of Lady Antonia's favourites, it turned out, so I was fairly pleased I ordered it – and then I had to be a pig and have a pudding. Glad I did: an apricot fool. So rare on a menu, that, and very silky and divine – lots of apricot compote on the top. The director Stephen Daldry then wandered over to pay his respects to my guest, and so I seized upon the diversion to wolf it down quickly.

I had been spoiled by the company – Lady Antonia truly is very charming and gently amusing, and the time just seemed to whizz along. But the food ...? Well it was perfectly fine, nothing too much wrong with it – but this place has moved me to add an extra category to my scoring system: *The Feeling*. Because this place feels great, you will have a guaranteed very good time. And that's important.

Postscript. True story: As I was leaving, a couple came up to me. The man said "Are you ...?" And I said "Am I what?" The woman said "You are, aren't you ...?" And I said "Am what?". And then they looked at one another, blinked in unison, and left. Well shoot me down, but I think that's a highly Pinteresque ending.

❑ *Joseph Connolly's latest novel is Jack The Lad and Bloody Mary (Faber and Faber, £8.99). All previous reviews may be viewed on the website www.josephconnolly.co.uk.*

uncovers middle-of-the-road prices

is a fifth. The trio – number three is Daniel's wife Martine – farm their 8.5 hectares organically and Daniel argues that "if you really want to make a terroir wine, you have to work the soil". Winemaking is as natural as possible too, and the results are restrained, very stylish wines, with an appealing minerality.

Just up the road *Domaine des Deux Roches* (Solutre and its neighbour *Vergisson*) is a much larger affair, around 40 hectares, and newer – set up by long-term friends Christian Collovray and Jean-Luc Terrier (pictured) in 1986. As Jean-Luc drives me through the vines, the variety of the plots, and hence the differences in bottle, is obvious. Again, there's smart minerality in the wines, alongside those scents of flowers, elegance and lingering pleasure.

Next stop is a domaine which, in size, falls between the last



two. To reach *l'Arfentiere*, the road passes through *Chardonnay* – the village which causes some confusion to consumers. Its vignerons, like many in neighbouring villages, are

allowed to put the village name on their bottles. But *Macon Villages* is also chardonnay... There's nothing puzzling in the wines of *Raphael Sallet*, however, most under the label of

his village, *Macon Uchizy*. Flinty minerality, purity, harmony were all words in my notes, and again the value for money is tempting indeed.

Last, and the smallest, is *Domaine Pascal Pauget*, set in softly rolling hills at the northern limit of the *Maconnais*, where vines play a lesser role in the landscape. Pascal and his wife Sylvie have worked organically for nearly 20 years, and extend the green philosophy into what goes on within the winery. They also have vines across the river Saone, at *Prety*. "My wines are the sons of Burgundy," he declares, and they are handsome indeed – creamy, polished flavours in the whites and supple, aromatic complexity in the reds. Beyond these examples, there are so many more. I'll be back, soon.

Recommended wines (some prices approximate):

Blason de Bourgogne Saint Veran 2008: £8-£9 at Waitrose, Tesco, Sainsbury's. *Cave de Lugny: Les Charmes Macon Lugny 2008*, £8.35, Waitrose, *Macon Chardonnay Les Beluses 2008*, Costco, £8.50. *Domaine Daniel Barraud: Saint Veran en Creches 2008*, £16.75, Pouilly Fuisse En Buland 2006, £28.50, both Lea & Sandeman; *Domaine*

des Deux Roches: Saint Veran Les Chailloux 2007, £13.25, *Berry Bros & Rudd, Saint Veran Rives de Longsault 2007*, £14, *Laithwaites, Domaine Sallet l'Arfentiere: Macon Uchizy 2008*, £9, *M&S, Domaine Pascal Pauget: Macon Chardonnay 2008*, £13, www.vinetrail.co.uk.

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