



■ Joseph Connolly with James Hogan, proprietor of Oberon Books at Hardy's

Picture: Polly Hancock

and always he wears a soldier's boots (spat upon and polished to an ebony mirror) and high-waisted trousers salvaged from the Coldstream, replete with red stripe. Replete too with a pair of large nappy safety pins fastened across the fly: not strictly standard military issue, I think – simply a flighty caprice all of his own.

My guest was a man who knows all about drama: James Hogan, sole proprietor of Oberon Books, a highly respected publisher of all things devoted to theatre and dance: 1,400 titles in print, three-quarters of them playscripts, as

well as such revered publications as the *Royal Ballet Yearbook*. James has been very canny lately in buying up and publishing big West End hits such as Howard Barker's *Scenes from an Execution* and Richard Bean's *One Man Two Guvnors* (which has been making hot cakes look like rather poor sellers). He liked the restaurant the moment he entered. "It looks," he said, "like a place where you really do want to eat". The menu bears this out: although I later discovered that the chef had been here only a week, there was tremendous assurance in the

rather quirky things listed, and that panache and confidence was carried through to the cooking.

So although one could toy with having venison roly poly, homemade fishcakes or a bavette steak, it was also very welcome to see a list of daily specials and the humble omelette: with or without fillings, frites and salad – you decide. James eats out rather a lot (his favourite restaurant – as befits a man of the theatre – is The Ivy, which, he says, serves the best fish and chips in London) and was attracted to quite a few things here. He went for watercress soup with poached oysters, followed by roast pheasant with bubble and squeak. I was having wood pigeon with braised Puy lentils ... and then ... what then ...? I just didn't know – though quickly decided to go for something that might be wonderful and might be a claggy and rather awful mess: wild mushroom and spinach crepes with gruyere.

As we happily glugged a purple and very plummy Languedoc, I asked James how he came to create Oberon Books. "It was back in 1984 – I was part of a play-reading group at the Riverside Studios, and it occurred to me that there were very few publishing outlets for young playwrights. So I thought I'd make one. And ever since, it's been a mixture of love and business... though always the idea was to say yes, not no". James himself is a playwright – although, modestly, he does not publish his own work. He holds the distinction of being the author of *Peacefully in his Sleep* – the first original play ever to be staged at the Gate Theatre in Notting Hill.

The watercress soup "looks radioactive", he said – but the vividness of the green was all down to a fine intensity and freshness. "Lovely and tangy", was his eventual opinion. "And good, proper, meaty oysters – the flavour really comes through". Which was also true of my tender and just-pink-enough sliced pigeon breast in a deeply pleasing jus, and squatting contentedly atop a bounce of various sweet and bitter leaves. Mains too: very good – the pheasant, with a nicely browned and crispy skin, was prettily presented on a bed of red cabbage ("not over vinegary, nor sugary" said James) with a mound of bubble and squeak alongside, and some good and crunchy haricots vert. "The pheasant is actually perfect," he said. "Bubble and squeak earthy, which I like".

Deeply comforting

I had two long crepes in a bowl, surrounded by a fondue goo of gruyere. The mushroom hit was as a wallop – the indulgent unctuousness of the whole rather deeply comforting. As with fondue, however, before you reach the end you do very terribly feel that you have ingested enough bleeding cheese to last you for the rest of your life. So when it came to pudding – and there were some attractive prospects – I thought I'd go for the cheese. I do amaze me, sometimes. So James and I shared a plate of British, from Neal's

Yard: Lincolnshire Poacher – like a hardish very mature cheddar – and Stichelton, which is fast becoming a better bet than Stilton, these days, being gorgeous and unpasteurised, as it is. We ate the fig, ignored the pointless quince jelly and goat's cheese (which, if I'm honest, I can only ever see as a sort of chalky and sour marshmallow, possessing a topnote of dung).

And at home ("technically Islington, but in character Holloway") James is a mean paella cook: "the wife of a friend of mine is Spanish, and I just watched her make a fine example, and learned from that. The secret is to put in the calamari at the beginning, the seafood at the end. And place a double sheet of foil across the whole thing so that the middle gets properly cooked. I also like to do game, which I get sent down from Scotland. Grouse, mainly – it freezes well". And for a party of 10 at Christmas he'll be cooking a turkey, a goose and a ham.

It's an easy place to be, Hardy's, and the food is pretty damn good – though not particularly the service, which, though smiley, is rather hit and miss. So: a good couple of hours in highly entertaining company: just like a decent play, really (not Separate Tables, though – far jollier than that). But then ... when you go to restaurants rather a lot, all the world's a stage. Exeunt.

■ Joseph Connolly's latest novel, *ENGLAND'S LANE*, is published by Quercus as a hardback and an ebook. All previous restaurant reviews may be viewed on the website www.josephconnolly.co.uk.

FACTFILE

■ HARDY'S

53 Dorset Street, W1

Tel: 020 7935 5929

■ Open Mon – Fri 12 – 3pm, 5.30 – 10.30pm. Sat 6 – 10pm. Sun 12 – 3pm.

■ Food: ★★★★★☆☆☆

■ Service: ★★★★★☆☆☆

■ The Feeling: ★★★★★☆☆☆

■ Cost: About £95 for three course meal for two with modest wine.

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