

Nightlife

Bow tie firmly in place, I have lately been celebrating at the so-called "Big Rooms" of the Miami Beach grand hotels, in the thrall of their dated grandeur as much as the entertainment they present. While these Beach showrooms do not exactly bring to mind the heyday of the Empire Room at the Waldorf-Astoria, they must be applauded nonetheless in their attempt to fly a rather lonely flag for a splendid variety of American nightlife, the state of which was more or less summed up by two ladies whom I followed out of a Rosemary Clooney set at La Ronde recently. Wrapping their furs tightly around their shoulders, the two-some marched arm-in-arm up the four tiers of the inverted wedding cake that is La Ronde, still humming some of Miss Clooney's more memorable songs. Halfway through a chorus of "Tenderly," one lady turned to the other and said, "Not like before," with the tiniest shake of her head. "But then what can you do?"

But exactly. That the hotel showroom is a white elephant, that it reflects a bygone era, that it must now double as a convention room or banquet hall, as does the stunning Starlight Room of the Doral, are incontestable facts. And so is the admittedly contrived New-Year's-Eve kind of fun which can be found there still, as in few other places in the United States.

Two recurring rumors about these showrooms ought to be put to rest at the outset: that they are flagrantly expensive, and that their audiences are strictly geriatric. As many will attest, I have never been one to worry about the price of a good time, but, if forced to compare the cost of a hotel showroom outing with that of a night of serious drinking, I would rate them as roughly equal. That the audiences of these showrooms do not generally impress as the type inclined to spend their weekends break-dancing, can, without difficulty, be seen as refreshing. In the mixed bag of a showroom audience can be found young honeymooners, European tourists, smart young locals with perverse tastes for High Kitsch, and assorted other types between the ages of 30 and 60, all perfectly able to walk unaided.

I can usually depend on having a reasonably good time in at least two showrooms on the Beach, two of the largest, as it happens: La Ronde at the Fontainebleau, and the Bal Masque at the Sheraton Bal-Harbour. I would also like to include the Pompeii Room of the Eden Roc in this category, but its entertainment policy, though it allowed for a 15-week run of *Ain't Misbeavin* earlier this season, is

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rather sadly off-again/on-again. The Diplomat is still not operating at full steam after last year's fire, and among most of the remaining 298 hotels on the Beach the term "entertainment" has come to mean the watching of "Family Feud" on folding chairs in the lobby.

The dizzying number of options in ticket price and show times at the Bal Masque Supper Club (9701 Collins Avenue, 868-2506 or 865-7511) is but one indication of its eagerness to please. This generosity of alternatives is no doubt important to the success of the room, which has not stopped producing 30-week spectaculars of the "Grand Revue Française" genre since the 1963-64 season, quite an achievement, and a record of longevity unmatched elsewhere on the Beach. The room is a particular favorite primarily because of its showgirls, who have fallen over the course of the room's history into two distinct types: the tall, stately "Ashton girl," named after Barry Ashton, the producer responsible for the

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success of the room's first 14 seasons; and the no less tall or stately but somewhat more graceful "Blackburn girl," who, at the behest of the producer of this year's fast-and-foxy "Follies Royale," Allan Blackburn, must be an expert dancer as well as a physical knock-out.

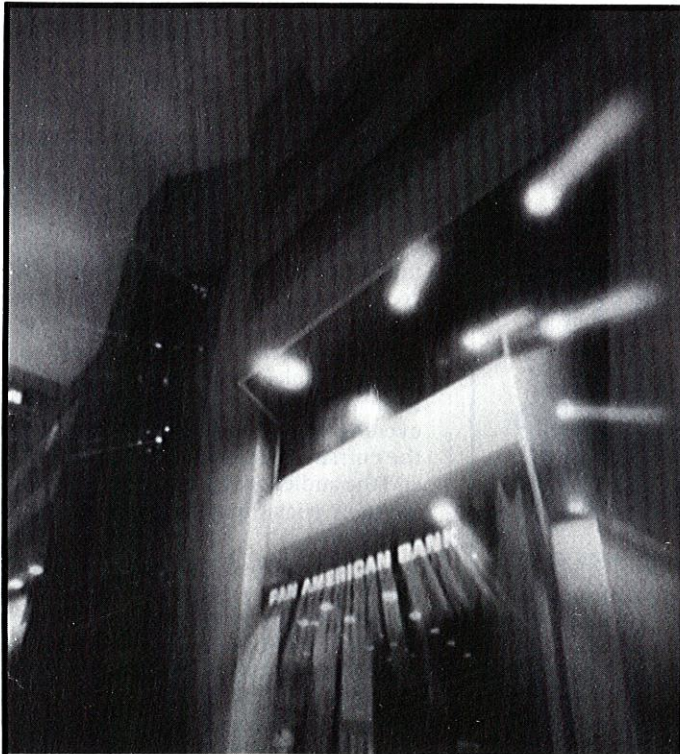
An atmosphere of fizzy excitement infuses the Bal Masque shortly after the dinner dishes have disappeared. This feeling is especially strong at those performances when the crowd is dominated by large parties of European tourists, who, being responsible for this sort of entertainment in the first place, seem to be particularly adept at appreciating it. The Follies Royale unabashedly presents every known twist and turn of the nearly naked female form, and then some. The girls are really quite good, if such a word can apply to performers whose role it is to suggest all the most imaginative permutations of badness. One can but marvel at the range of expressiveness of which several are capable through the simple re-arrangement of legs and breasts.

One can but marvel at the range of expressiveness of which several Follies Royale girls are capable through the simple re-arrangement of nearly naked legs and breasts.

Just at points when all this titillation becomes nearly intolerable, Mr. Blackburn introduces into the show some little acts of danger. Between the Four Tours of "Sensational Paris" (can-can dancing) and "Swinging London" (disco dancing) and "Glamorous Hollywood" (ballroom dancing) and "the Colorful Caribbean" (calypso

and samba), men on rolling platforms and families of Bohemian acrobats perform hair-raising stunts—feats of skill which, though perhaps *per se* no more dangerous than many performed on the old Ed Sullivan Show, seem all the more death-defying when done ten feet from one's ashtray. These are followed by Dominique, "the World's Greatest Baffling Pickpocket," who exercises his talent at stripping the wallets, watches, credit cards, ties, and, in some cases, undershirts, from an audience full of willing victims.

When the chorus-girls return centerstage, several in the audience are moved to physical expressions of enthusiasm. Two or three crisp bills sailed onto the stage during the finale of my most recent visit. The male components of a group of Belgian couples took to pounding the tables in time with the climatic kickline. Wolf whistles, albeit discreet, were heard, and, unless I am mistaken, some very friendly clinching was conducted in the darker recesses of the upper tier. Such is the influence of the Bal Masque.



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